

**The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
July 19-20, 2008
2 Chronicles 29:1-2; 32:1-8, 20-23**

**St. John's Lutheran Church
Alexandria, Virginia
Rev. John Meehan**

“Hezekiah: Faithful Leadership”

Our summer preaching series, “Portraits of Faith,” continues today. Thus far, we have focused on Peter and Paul, Daniel, Lydia, and today Hezekiah. So, just who is this Hezekiah? His name literally means “God is my strength,” and as we shall see, that was the foundation of Hezekiah’s life: God’s strength, God’s power, God’s might, not his own. And so Hezekiah demonstrates for us faithful leadership, which is the theme for today’s message. May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

In today’s Scripture lesson, we learn that Hezekiah was a king who ruled the southern kingdom of Judah from his capital city, Jerusalem. He reigned as king for 29 years from 727 – 698 B.C., and came to the throne when he was only 25 years old. Hezekiah, unlike all but a few kings of Judah, received unconditional approval from the writer of the book of Kings in the Old Testament – very high praise, indeed. Listen to what the writer says of Hezekiah: **“And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done... He trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him”** (2 Kings 18:3, 5). So, why such high praise? What did Hezekiah do to merit such acclaim? He closed down all outlying worship sites throughout the kingdom, centralizing worship at the temple in Jerusalem. He banned the use of sacred pillars and trees (asherah), carry-overs from Judah’s pagan neighbors. He even destroyed the bronze serpent (nehushtan) which Moses had made (Numbers 24:4-10) because it had become a spiritual snare to the people. They were worshiping it, burning incense to it, and so degenerated into idolatry. Hezekiah was a reformer – something which we as Lutherans ought to understand and appreciate. His desire was to strip away everything that was not of God, and restore the people to right worship of the Lord. Undoubtedly, not everyone agreed with the king, or liked what he was doing – reformers have that challenge. Still, he did what needed to be done, whether it was met with popular approval or not. Isn’t that what faithful leadership is about – doing what may not be popular, but what needs to be done?

Hezekiah’s reign fell during an age when the super power of that time, Assyria, was doing a lot of saber rattling – and not just rattling, but thrusting, cutting, and conquering. Kingdom after kingdom fell under Assyria’s military might, including Judah’s northern neighbor, Israel, who fell in 721 B.C. The handwriting on the wall seemed obvious to many, and it looked to be only a matter of time before Judah and Jerusalem also fell. For a number of years, Hezekiah and his kingdom were vassals of Assyria; that is, they were allowed some freedom but had to pay annually, and pay heavily. This is where today’s Scripture lesson picks up. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, has invaded Judah and is going to destroy Jerusalem. At such a critical time, Hezekiah does some critical things: he diverts water from the surrounding countryside and digs a tunnel to supply Jerusalem with water during a siege. If you go to Jerusalem, you can see this even today: Hezekiah’s tunnel. He also built up the city walls and prepared his people for battle. He spoke words of encouragement to his people: **“Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him, for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles”** (2 Chronicles 32:7). And we read that “the people took confidence.” Isn’t that what faithful leadership is about – bringing encouragement in time of need?

More than all this, though, Hezekiah, together with the prophet Isaiah, prayed to the Lord. And that truly is what faithful leadership is about – interceding with the Lord to be gracious and merciful, to do what he alone can do, to accomplish what seems impossible from a human perspective, to humbly submit ourselves in willing obedience to his will. And it is precisely then, when human resources and ingenuity are null and void, when we are empty, that God is able to act and fill us. When our reliance is upon ourselves, how can God work in our lives? When we look to our own resources, our own power and strength, is there any room for God to intervene? How many times do we look upon prayer as the last resort? When we've tried everything else, *then* let's give prayer a shot. After all, it's kind of like chicken soup; it can't hurt, but maybe – just maybe – it can help. If that's our outlook on prayer, it reflects our outlook on God as well, and it is weak, self-centered, and half-hearted. In short, it stinks. God help us – literally!

After interceding and crying to heaven, Isaiah received this word from the Lord about Sennacherib of Assyria: **“I know your sitting down and your going out and coming in, and your raging against me. Because you have raged against me and your arrogance has come to my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came”** (Isaiah 38:28-29). And so it happened. God intervened as God alone can do, saving his people and their city. An epidemic swept through the Assyrian camp, and overnight they left Judah and returned back to Ninevah, the capital of Assyria. Political intrigue followed Sennacherib home, and his own sons assassinated him. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall, but the kingdom of our God remains forever. That kingdom of our God is no earthly realm, but wherever Jesus Christ is worshiped and obeyed as King, there is the kingdom of God. This King did not wear a crown of gold, but one of thorns, and his throne was the wood of the cross. This is the King who gave his life for his people. This is the King who loved his subjects literally to death.

Faithful and godly leadership, in Hezekiah's time and in our own, involves doing the right thing, the thing that needs to be done, whether that is met with popular approval or not. Faithful and godly leadership brings with it encouragement and a sense of confidence on the part of people. Faithful and godly leadership looks to prayer for strength and support, relying on God's power, not our own. In this election year, when we are all looking for faithful and godly leadership for our nation, may the Lord raise up leaders who are not afraid to do the right thing, who give encouragement and confidence, who seek the Lord's face in prayer as the first thing in all things. May God make it so for Jesus' sake. Amen.