

Todd R. Allen  
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Interim Pastor  
Epiphany

January 29,  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after

“Basis for Confidence”  
“The Story” : Chapter 16

Texts: 2 Kings 19:14-22, 32-33  
Hebrews 13:1-4, 5-8

2 Kings 19:14-22, 32-33

<sup>14</sup> Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. <sup>15</sup> And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: “LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. <sup>16</sup> Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.

<sup>17</sup> “It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. <sup>18</sup> They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. <sup>19</sup> Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, LORD, are God.”

<sup>20</sup> Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I have heard your prayer concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria. <sup>21</sup> This is the word that the LORD has spoken against him:

““Virgin Daughter Zion  
despises you and mocks you.  
Daughter Jerusalem  
tosses her head as you flee.

<sup>22</sup> Who is it you have ridiculed and blasphemed?  
Against whom have you raised your voice  
and lifted your eyes in pride?  
Against the Holy One of Israel!

<sup>32</sup> “Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria:

“He will not enter this city  
or shoot an arrow here.  
He will not come before it with shield  
or build a siege ramp against it.  
<sup>33</sup> By the way that he came he will return;  
he will not enter this city,  
declares the LORD.

Hebrews 13:1-4, 5-8

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. <sup>2</sup> Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup> Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. <sup>5</sup> Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

“Never will I leave you;  
never will I forsake you.”<sup>1]</sup>

<sup>6</sup> So we say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.  
What can mere mortals do to me?”

<sup>7</sup> Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. <sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

As I kid, I often enjoyed watching episodes of Laurel and Hardy. Does anyone remember them? They were two comedians who were always getting into trouble, and they starred in dozens of films in the 1930's. By the time I was a boy—and here's my attempt to prove how young I am!--they were showing up on TV. I'd laugh out loud as they were chased by a tiger—or managed to spill a bucket paint all over themselves, and there was a phrase one of them always said—in the midst of these calamities—and it was this:

*“Well, here's another fine mess you've got me into...”*

Sound familiar?

*We do get ourselves into trouble at times, and other people also get us into trouble too...it's a fact of life that we make mistakes, and the bad choices other people make also affect us. There are consequences, if you like, for human behavior....*

And here is the simplest introduction to what we find happening in Chapter 16 of “The Story.” We enter again into the history of ancient Israel, and we return to a time when the once great nation ruled by David and Solomon has become split into two kingdoms, one in the North, called Israel, and the other in the South, called Judah. Last week, we learned that this time in the history of God’s people was one of greed and faithlessness—so much so that God sent a series of prophets—or messengers—to warn both kingdoms that things could not continue as they were going or—at least—they could not do so without dire consequences.

And what happened?

Well, here’s the sad result of all this: We read that both kingdoms continued in their crooked ways, and they continued to do so as one prophet followed another; in fact, historians tell us that God’s prophets were active in the Northern Kingdom—in the Kingdom of Israel—for 208 years.

If you ever wonder if God is patient, friends, well here’s proof of this! I mean, how many of us, as parents, will let our misbehaving child go on mis-behaving for 208 minutes, for instance? There should be consequences for such behavior, right? There is a need to do some correcting, right?

Well, there is, and while I must caution us to ascribe to God too much in the way of human thinking and actions, the writers of this part of our Bible are clear that after 208 years of trying to change the behavior of the Northern Kingdom, God has had enough—that God is finished, as it were—with trying to plead—with trying to persuade. And so, we read that God allows the nation of Assyria to invade the North Kingdom and to take its people into exile. Ten whole tribes of Israel, we are told, are soon spread throughout the Assyrian empire, never again to return back to their homeland. They become “the lost tribes of Israel.”

There are consequences for human behavior.

There is still the Southern Kingdom, though—the Kingdom of Judah—the place where the remaining two tribes of Israel reside, and our remaining focus will be here, today.

It is a Kingdom ruled by a series of kings who are either good—or bad. Sadly, we are told that out of a total of 38 kings of Judah, only 5—yes, five!—of them do what is right in the eyes of God. And we should also be quick to remember that the example set by a king pretty much applies to the people they rule, as well, and so, there is a

lot of greed and corruption going on within the Judah—as a whole, when the writers of the Bible tell us that the king did what was “evil in God’s sight.”

The reverse, though, holds true. One of these good kings is Hezekiah. And now, I want to focus just on him.

What can we learn from him?

When the going gets tough, for instance, what does Hezekiah do?  
What does he resist doing, as well?

Let us pray: Grant Lord God, that the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, would both be acceptable in your holy sight, for you remain Our Rock and Our Redeemer.

Amen.

Yes, there is Hezekiah, and we’ve just heard Nancy share a bit about him.

As I’ve already mentioned, today’s service is a delightfully different, as our 2106 Confirmation Class is joining in me in worship leadership. I hope I am correct in also noting that this is the first time, in quite some time, that your Confirmands have done this. May this be a re-start of a tradition, here at Trinity! And let me add that Dora and I also very proud of these newest members of Trinity!

A bit of background: Beginning in September, of last year, these five young adults came together to explore their faith in God—more specifically, them came together to look at their faith critically, even to ask themselves if the Jesus they came come to know—growing up within their families, and also within this church family—was the same Jesus they saw now, at this point in their lives. A key tool in guiding our discussions was this book, by Phil Yancey, entitled, “*The Jesus I Never Knew.*” This book is a personal testimony by its author of how he came to know Jesus differently, later in his life, and how he did so through a re-reading of Scripture and also a review of motion pictures depicting the life of Christ. We met as a group into January of this year. We watched film clips of the movies Phil Yancey watched. We also read this book which also included historical information about the life of Jesus, and the times he lived in. We read Scripture. We also spent time learning about the history of the Presbyterian church—what we believe as Presbyterians—and how we do church, so to speak, as Presbyterians....

*But I lift up the different aspect of today’s service as a way to lift up one of the key ingredients of being a person of faith: You and I are called to be different. We are*

*called—by God—to think differently—to act differently, too, and while there is no moment when we should fail to follow this course of action, there is probably no better witness to our faith than when the going gets tough.*

It should come as no surprise to you, I am sure, that our young adults face a lot of pressure to “fit in”—to be just like everyone else, and these pressures—which take a whole host of forms—often force them to have to say “no”—to draw a line, in the sand, to pull a phrase from last week....

These pressures make them one with Hezekiah, let me suggest, because—with them—he is facing a critical decision. Outside the walls of Jerusalem resides a massive a military force—the armies of Assyria, once again—a force of nearly 200,000 fighting men, and the commander of that force—more to the point—is ridiculing the faith of Hezekiah and the people. Hear his words:

*“This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: ‘On what are you basing this confidence of yours? You say that you have the counsel and the might for war—but you speak only empty promises. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me?*

*I know you are depending on Egypt—that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces the hand of everyone who leans upon it! Such is Pharaoh, King of Egypt, to all who depend upon him!*

*But if you say, ‘we are depending on the Lord our God’, isn’t he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed?’ Furthermore, have I come to destroy this place without word from the Lord? The Lord himself told me to march against this country and destroy it!”*

There is much we can say about this declaration, but, to begin with, *it is the taunt of a bully—the kind of person we meet who forces us to make a choice about what we believe—and what we should do in response to our beliefs.*

And I use the term “bully” very deliberately, because I do not to downplay, but rather to lift up, a very real reality faced by too many of young people, today. It is on moments like these—experienced all too often—that spirits—and lives—are being damaged, and often severely damaged, and here’s my point: When the going gets tough, what does Hezekiah do?

He does three things:

First, *He draws a line in the sand—he does. He knows what he is about, and so he stands his ground. He does not change his beliefs about God, in particular....*

Now, none of us is raised in a vacuum in matter so faith, and so the question begs: How did Hezekiah come to have this faith—this truth? Well, the answer, quite simply,

is that he learned it from his parents—and from those around him. In this way, he is no different from the young people you see before you, today: The first place we learn about God in Jesus Christ, friends, is in our homes. As parents—as adults—you and I are the first teachers of the faith—what Dora and I did—as co-teachers of these Confirmands—was to build upon the foundation laid in your home, by the Spirit of God —by the spirit of God filling your life, directing your thoughts—your words—your actions—and, speaking personally, I think you all did a fantastic job because this is no easy task. But you did not do this alone, I hope: I hope there was also the ministry of this place, of the other faith communities of which you’ve been a part, down the years—yes, *if there ever was cause for saying “thank you” it must be, first to you, as parents, as caring and concerned fellow believers—as a loving and supportive community—because—when push comes to shove—our young people follow your lead—they do: The line they draw in the sand comes from your example. And this is what Hezekiah does here as king, he refuses to give into the taunts—to the ridicule...*

I like how Connor Anderson put in his statement of faith (and I have been given permission by our confirmands to share excerpts from the statements of faith they wrote as part of this class and read before your Session). Connor wrote this of Jesus:

*“I believe that Jesus is the Son of God.  
I believe that he taught the truth.”*

A line in the sand....

You know, you and I live in times when it seems like anything goes—in matters of behavior, or belief—in fact, there is a great deal of relativism present in our time—the idea that one truth is just as good as another. But this is not what Connor says here —and this is not what Hezekiah, also believed, so many years before.

What is the truth—to us?

Is it the truth God gives us, through His son?

Or is there another source of truth—for us—for you and me—that guides our actions—our thoughts?

Which this leads me to lift up another point from that blustering Assyrian commander, and here it is: He is quite sure of the truth that God sees things from the point of view of the world. Let me say that again: He is quite sure that God sees things from the point of view of the world...

His point of view is based on power politics. It is based on the agreement—surely secured by massive payments in gold—that will see Egypt come to the aid of Israel, should it be invaded. Such was the common practice of the day. If you were a

weaker nation—this was how the world worked. It was something you just did, if you wanted to survive, much less to thrive.

And let's face it: The world, as we know it, runs on a lot of "givens", friends—it does: There is the expectation that you and I will do this—or do that—in order to get ahead, or simply to get by. And some of these expectations—these givens—have a lot going for them: I mean there have to be some ground rules for how we live together. *But what happens when these rules come to fly in the face of what we believe—and hold dear—about God—and about our faith in Christ?*

An observation: It is hard being a prophet. Being a messenger. Being a spokesperson for God. It just is. If there is anything you and I can take away from the lives of Elijah—Elisha—Amos—Hosea—and, today, the lives of Jeremiah and Isaiah—it is this: *They faced a tough crowd—they just did. They did not fit in, and—tougher still—God asked them to continue to stick out like a sore thumb—so much so that the high and mighty—the rich and the powerful—opposed them....even wanted to do away with them.*

Jesus followed in those footsteps. Thanks to the Phil Yancey book, our Confirmands were reminded of how Jesus was like the fellow Jews of his day, but also—and just as importantly—how he was not like them, when it came to the way the world worked:

*“Jesus was Jewish and some Jews couldn't believe the Messiah could come from Nazareth”, Nancy Biegel writes in her statement of faith, “Jesus did not fit the description of the Messiah that was expected...”*

Well said, Nancy—Jesus did not fit in. And, you know, we can't leave out your sister now, can we? Here's what Sophie Beigel added to this idea:

*“The people who were considered outcasts liked Jesus, whereas the most respectable people didn't. I know that Jesus never looked down on anyone...”*

How does the world work?

Well, then—as now—the rich and powerful do hold sway—they do—and there is also an often unwritten code of conduct in society that marginalizes the poor—that pushes those who are different to the margins.

How do we respond to this?

What does our faith require of us?

You know, you have to like admire Hezekiah—you just do. Here he stands in the most perilous of situations—remember that army poised just outside the city gates—and we read that he does three things One, he stands his ground, and, now, two, that he decides to do something different...

What do I mean?

Well, the normal thing to do would be to do two things: to either flee—as the king of the Northern Kingdom had done when the Assyrians came calling, earlier—or to wait for the Egyptians to show up and to join them in the expected great battle.

But this is not what Hezekiah does.

Again, what does our faith require of us?  
Does it require that we blend in—or stick out?

Here's an observation: I don't think a single meeting of the Confirmation Class did not feature some sharing about how hard it is when you stick out, especially as a teenager, as a young adult...and so, as we read the Phil Yancey book together, all of our young people were touched by the kind of life that Jesus had to lead, in order to be true to his beliefs—to his mission:

*“Jesus had to experience rejection, God forsaken-ness, pain, indignity, shame, and death which shows great self-restraint because He could have ended much of it”*

So writes Sophie—and thank you for sharing that—and let me say that very often, friends, sticking out for others—and sticking up for others—is doing something truly different, and doing something God expects us to do. It makes us kin with Jesus—and also with Hezekiah, to return to our account in Second Kings, today. The King of Judah will not deny his beliefs—and he will not pin his hopes on a foreign alliance, either—he makes no plans to send his army out to fight in battle, as the Assyrians fully expect, as besieged kings usually do....

No, Hezekiah does something different. **And now—thirdly--he does something incredibly powerful: He falls to his knees in prayer. He says the words that Nancy lifted up for us, a few moments ago...**

And let me say this about his prayer: Hezekiah knows that he has no claim to be special—to deserve anything different than what has befallen the Northern Kingdom—the fate of those fellow Jews who are now spread to the winds—he does not. There is not a hint of self-righteousness in his prayer....

*“I believe that Jesus came to earth to die for our sins.*

*I believe that the punishment for sin is death and that Jesus died on the cross to suffer for our sins..."*

Again, Connor cuts to the chase—and he does this at home, right Jim and Erica?—but seriously friends, here, so succinctly said, is the basis for the humility we all should have, friends—and surely the humility Hezekiah demonstrates today: Like us, he knows that he—and the nation—have fallen far short—so far short, in fact, that it is true that God is using the Assyrian armies as a means to execute justice for the wrongs of Judah—of its people, or their king.

For the bar is set high—it is, for us. In our Confirmation Class we spent a good deal of time on the Sermon on the Mount. We did so as Phil Yancey also finds it to be the centerpiece of Jesus' teachings—and here's the take way, in the words of Sophie: *"I believe that when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, he knew we aren't perfect, but he wants us to try as hard as we can to rise to impossible ideals..."*

God calls us to be different, and our failures to be different have consequences—here, again, is the context for Hezekiah's humility—indeed, the fact that bring him to his knees, friends: *He know how far short he—and the nation—have come, and he knows that God—the holy God who has already sent the Northern Kingdom into exile is equally justified in doing the same to them.*

It is hard—is it not?—to know that the bar is set so high—that Jesus teaches us to do things that do not come naturally—that even fly totally in the face of what is normal—what is expected in terms of thought and behavior. To say that these young people did not also share in feeling inadequate to the call—and to the commission—God gives to them in Christ, would be an understatement--I think they even felt the distance between the ideals of our faith, and the realities of the world around them even more so, precisely because they are teenagers....because they are clear-eyed—and filled with hearts that beat—and feel—so strongly...

Oh, is there a need for grace—for God's forgiveness through Christ?

**Well, just ask them!**

And if you ask them, friends, here is what they will also add to the equation:

*"Jesus makes his home in my heart—I will never be alone because he has promised me that we will never part. He came down to earth on a mission of love, and with a mission of love..."*

*"With God in my life I can trust that I will never be alone—he holds me close in a warm embrace and shields me from the world's deceit..."*

Thank you, Rachel—and thank you, Kristan—for these words—words from the heart—and aren't they words that touch us, too, friends? Words that get to the crux of the matter? I think so—and here's why: *Yes, Hezekiah falls to his knees in prayer—and he does so knowing that he—and the nation—do not deserve to be spared—but he also trusts in the grace of God. How so? It is by the grace of God that Israel has been delivered in the past, and, now, if this is God's will, deliverance will come again!*

Because God does hold us in an embrace friends.....

God does love us...

God has died for us....

God has risen from the grave, for us....

Here are articles of faith—and here—especially when push comes to shove—is the basis for our confidence,

Our Confidence that God has saved us, in Christ.

Our Confidence that we can make a difference in the world

And our Confidence that we can be the difference God wants us, to be, through His grace and His power....

Nancy, you said it so well:

*“Jesus makes a difference in my life. I've learned a lot throughout this Confirmation Class--and I know I would like to become a member of this church.”*

The vote was unanimous—no surprise, right?

I've called this message: *“Basis for Confidence”*.

Nancy, Sophie, Connor, Rachel and Kristan: Let me say that we have a basis for confidence in the future of Trinity Presbyterian Church:

*Because the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ to you is the same, today and always.*

*Because of the dedicated road you have traveled to this point in your lives*

*And because of the genuine commitment you have made to now continuing that journey with all of here, in this special place.*

Congratulations on all you have achieved!

*May you bless us in with your God-given gifts!*

*And may we also bless you as our journey together continues!*

And let all of God's people say: Amen!!!