

“Are You Alive?”

Reading: 2 Kings 18:17-32; Isaiah 53

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Try and imagine for a moment what it would have been like to be in the city of Jerusalem on that day when the Assyrian army delivered their ultimatum. It's something we can't *really* imagine because it was practically a different world then, but we need to at least try to imagine the feeling of claustrophobic panic that must have crept through the city. You've been hearing the news recently of how the Assyrian army has been conquering nations left and right using shockingly brutal tactics. Your kinsmen in the northern kingdom of Israel have just had their nation smashed to pieces and most of the citizens have been forcefully relocated into a foreign land. Then the word came that the Assyrians didn't stop in Israel, but they started conquering the outlying towns of your own nation, Judah, as well. And then they're right outside your gates, the unstoppable force of one of the world's most powerful empires, and your city is the only one left unconquered, and they're demanding that you surrender.

Since Jerusalem is the capital it's a fortified city, so it's surrounded by a wall that should be able to keep the invaders out for quite some time, barring any catastrophes. But then you hear the Assyrian commander shouting his taunts over the wall, and rather than speaking Aramaic, the official courtly language that common people wouldn't understand, he's speaking Hebrew, the common language. He wants the common people to understand what is about to happen to them; he's trying to terrorize them. He says that he intends to put your city under siege, surrounding it with his forces so that nothing and no one can get in or out. Everyone knew that sieges could last years, and conditions inside the city would become unspeakably horrible. The Assyrian commander made a morbid joke about the people having to eat and drink their own waste, and that wasn't an exaggeration. Starvation would set in, and the city would be crowded and stinking before long from the lack of sanitation, and plague would inevitably follow. At that point the city walls might start to feel less like your main defense and more like the walls of your tomb.

And as all of these images roll around in your mind, the Assyrian says some other words that maybe feel like a breath of fresh air in contrast to the thoughts of reeking starvation and disease. He says that there's a way out of this tomb, a way to enjoy your own land again, at least for a little while, until the Assyrians come back and take you into exile. But at least you don't have to suffer through a siege and die pointlessly. “Choose life and not death!” he cries. That doesn't sound like a bad offer to me; after all, what real hope is there otherwise of anything but misery and death when things are this bad?

Choose life and not death! Sounds like a good idea! But what is life? And what, really, is death? It seems like it should be a simple enough question to answer. You're alive when you're up and moving around and breathing, and you're dead when you're stiff and cold and unmoving. But is it really that simple?

What does it even mean, really, to be alive as a human? Suppose someone is in some sort of accident and doctors can hook them up to machinery and keep their heart beating and their lungs breathing, but they're brain dead, and let's say for the sake of argument that we can be absolutely certain that they're really brain dead: that person's *body* is clearly still alive, but would we say that

the *person* is still alive? Or look at it the other way: if you're in an accident and your heart stops beating and some time later they're able to revive you, were you dead? I'm not trying to start a debate, and there are some legal definitions of life and death that we've agreed on, but what it means to be "alive" isn't as obvious as it seems.

One of the reasons I love science fiction so much is because it speculates about big questions like this. If we build a robot so advanced that it thinks it's alive, is it alive? If it can simulate thoughts and feelings and dreams inside its metal head, if it can love and hate and carry on a conversation and ponder philosophy, does it have rights? It's not biological life, but could there be such a thing as mechanical life? Or electronic life? If we simulate a human brain on a computer so well that it thinks like we do, is that a mind?

Or, for the sake of argument — and again, I'm not trying to start a debate; I just want to provoke some thought — suppose that there could be life on other planets. Would we even be able to recognize it if we found it? There are real-life scientists today thinking about that question. We have a nuclear-powered robot driving around on Mars right now trying to determine if Mars could have ever supported life. We're not even always able to recognize life forms on our own planet, and scientists are finding critters that can survive and thrive in places on earth that we never before thought could harbor life. What would life look like on a totally different planet with a totally different environment? Aliens on *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* generally look more or less like humans — arms, legs, eyes, a mouth, maybe with spots or some antennae or fur or something, but we can recognize them as alive. But if there were such a thing as aliens, we couldn't expect them to look or act or think like us at all. What is *life*? It's not as obvious as we might think it is.

Well, that Assyrian commander is hardly getting so philosophical in his definition of what constitutes life and death. You're alive when the Assyrians let you leave the city upright; you're dead when you've either starved to death or been hacked to pieces by Assyrian swords. But it's a central claim of this story we're telling about God and His creation that God defines *life* differently. We're not talking about biological life; that's hard enough to define, but there is another sort of life that the people of God have always been claiming as a necessary part of our existence that we can so easily neglect. It's the claim that life looks most like that picture of a suffering servant that Isaiah foretold, that we who have the benefit of history now recognize as being revealed in Jesus Christ. It's the claim that you can live an entire lifetime and be certifiably "alive," biologically, without ever truly living.

And it's odd, because the life of this suffering servant doesn't really sound that great. The prophet Isaiah tells us that there's nothing attractive or desirable about Him at all. In fact, He's despised and rejected. He suffers, He's pierced, He's crushed, and it's all because of the wrongs committed by other people: this is someone who suffers unjustly, and yet, like a lamb led to the slaughter, He doesn't even open His mouth to defend Himself. Even in death He is humiliated; He's counted among the depraved. It seems pretty obvious that this person has chosen death, not life.

But I think back to those words of that Assyrian commander — "Choose life and not death!" — and he triggers a memory. Someone else said something like that somewhere else in our story. I think back to Moses, at the end of his life, giving his last speech to the people of God as they stand on the brink of claiming the homeland God had promised them. "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction," Moses told them. "Choose life!" he said, "so that you and your

children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him.” The message is that you can be biologically alive but miss a deeper life that is characterized by hearing the voice of God and responding to Him. Several hundred years earlier, Moses said almost the same thing as that Assyrian commander — “Choose life, not death!” — but his meaning was quite different.

You see, the enemies of God have always loved almost-telling-the-truth. It’s the best tactic for lying, to be fair: use as much of the truth as you can, but twist it just enough to make it mean what you want it to mean. Think back to the beginning of our story, to the first lie that was told — and, really, the root of all lies that have been told since. God had warned the very first humans to live within the boundaries He set, don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because if they broke God’s boundaries and rebelled, they would die. And the serpent snuck up and said, “You will not *surely* die.” And he was right, sort of: they didn’t die immediately, but they were cut off from the deeper life that came from relationship with God. He knew enough of God’s truth to cloak his lie in convincing arguments, and every human since then has been faced with that choice between life and death. “Don’t worry about death,” the serpent said. “Choose life, not death!” Moses said, pointing them to the life that would come from following God closely. “Choose life, not death!” said the Assyrian commander, assuring them that if they just trust him rather than God, they’ll be able to live out the rest of their lives. “Here is true life that is faithful to God even unto the point of death!” cries the suffering servant foretold by Isaiah.

Isaiah is pointing us to Jesus, the one who proves to us that a life lived faithfully to God is genuinely alive, more alive than that Assyrian commander would leave you if you chose his sort of life by choosing safety over faithfulness to God. Jesus showed us a life beyond mere biology, a life that can’t be summed up by things like respiration and metabolism and reproduction. He showed us a life of a different quality, a life with a reason for being, a life with purpose and hope because it finds life in relationship to God. “We all, like sheep, have gone astray,” Isaiah says, but there is true life in following Jesus.

It is the times of crisis that reveal our true priorities. The Assyrian army camps outside your door and demands that you surrender on their terms or die, and you’ve got to choose whether you’re really willing to trust your God or not. Or you face the crisis of sickness or injury, and you’ve got to choose your priorities: panic and despair, or faith in God? That doesn’t mean we never take action or go to a doctor, but it does mean that we trust God and continue to hope in Him regardless of the circumstance. Or we face the crisis of rejection by those who do not hold our values of love and holiness, and we’ve got to choose. Or we hear the lies of the enemy, the lies of a life that sounds so good at the start but has long-lasting consequences, the lies of comfort and pleasure over meaning and purpose and hope, and we’ve got to choose. The question is not whether we will choose life over death, the question is which life we will choose. It’s the crises that reveal our priorities, but those priorities are set in a thousand little choices made long before the crisis.

When Moses placed the choice before the people of Israel many years ago, he had them line up on facing hillsides and recite to one another the blessings and curses that would result from their choices. Today, in the age of the Spirit of Christ, we see the character of our choice revealed to us in a different way, and so we recite those blessings to one another in slightly different words:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.



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