Hezekiah: Of Pride and Humility
2 Kings 18-20

It would not be hard for most people with some biblical knowledge to list the top two kings in Israelite history. Clearly, David is the pinnacle of royal memory in Israel. He would be followed by his son Solomon who built the temple and is credited with authorship of 3 books in our Old Testament. But after that it gets murky. King Saul might be the third most known king of Israel simply because he was the first. Yet, he ended up having a nervous breakdown that was most often interpreted as being possessed by a demon. After that we just don’t know much about the kings of Israel.

The answer to the question, “Who is the most important or most beloved king of Israel after David?” would have to be Hezekiah.

* He is the only king in Israel’s history, other than David, of whom it was said, “The Lord was with him” (18:7)
  * The Bible continually says of him “He did right in the eyes of the Lord.”
  * He removed the “high places” of pagan worship throughout Israel and Judah, something no other king had done, including David (18:4).
  * He trusted in the Lord (18:5,7) in the face of foreign assaults.
  * He and David were the only kings ever to defeat the Philistines.
  * The Bible gives the impression in some places that he was greater than David when it says of him, “There was none like him” (18:5).
* His father Ahaz and his son Mannasseh both did evil in the eyes of the Lord, but Hezekiah remained sure and steadfast throughout his life. He was the good guy in the family.
  * There is more biblical material about him than any other king with the exception of David. It’s a shame therefore, and one of the reasons I don’t tie my preaching to the lectionary, that the lectionary doesn’t include his story. I suppose he’s like Karl Malone of the Utah Jazz or Ernie Banks of the Chicago Cubs. People don’t remember him very much because despite the fact he’s one of the all-time greats, he never won a championship. King Hezekiah never wrote a book we have in our Bible like David (the Psalms) or Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes). He didn’t build a temple like Solomon. He didn’t kill a giant like David. He didn’t go mad like Saul. He just did right in the eyes of the Lord.

Hezekiah became king at the age of 25 and ruled Judah for 29 years. You’ll recall that the kingdom of Israel split into northern and southern sections after Solomon. Following Solomon the northern kingdom was called Israel and was ruled by Jeroboam, while the southern kingdom was called Judah and ruled by Solomon’s son Rehoboam. These kingdoms remained divided and the northern kingdom finally fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. While the Assyrians were overruning Israel in the north, Hezekiah was obediently following the covenant God had made with Judah in the south. Hezekiah reigned in Judah from 727BC – 698BC. That means he was the king of Judah when Israel no longer had a king in the north. The Lord was with him and he did right in the eyes of the Lord.

So we should know something about Hezekiah shouldn’t we? His story is told primarily in 2 Kings 18-20, but there are supplemental passages about his life in Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Chronicles 29-32.
In 2 Kings chapters 18 and 19 we learn about his political maneuverings with Sennacherib, ruler of the Assyrians, who had overrun Israel. When Hezekiah was only 31 years old he was faced with an invasion by the Assyrians. To avoid a confrontation Hezekiah paid off Sennacherib with gold and silver taken from the temple. Later on, when Sennacherib continued to press Hezekiah for complete submission Hezekiah stood up to this arrogant enemy. The prophet Isaiah intervened and pronounced a great curse on the Assyrians and 185,000 of them were killed in a mysterious, divinely-directed act of vengeance. Hezekiah was hailed as the victor and the people of Jerusalem were spared. It was a miraculous act of God reminiscent of the parting of the Red Sea and the drowning of Pharaoh’s army.

You can understand how Israelite historians would have mixed reviews on Hezekiah. At times he acquiesced to the demands of foreign enemies, while at others he waited on the Lord to intervene. Ultimately, he stood up to the blustering Sennacherib, but in the early days he faltered and wavered. He gave in for the sake of political expedience rather than stand firm on the covenant with Yahweh. We will find a similar mix of good and bad in 2 Kings 20. The account I read from 2 Kings 20 earlier in the service gives us a taste of Hezekiah’s strengths and weaknesses. It’s one of the intriguing facts of the history of Israel that the biblical writers give us an unvarnished portrait of their leaders. Even a man like Hezekiah, whom some considered the second coming of David, was portrayed as a flawed vessel in search of God’s favor. In chapter 20 we’ll see a king humble enough to cry out to God for help in physical crisis, only to be followed by a foolish act of foreign diplomacy that exposed his pride. We see humility and pride contending in the heart of the same person. In that sense, Hezekiah is not unlike us, for we have the same struggle.

First, a look at his humility.

I. Humility (20:1-11)

At the age of 39 Hezekiah contracted some kind of disease. No one knows today what the disease was although some have argued it was the bubonic plague. An ancient remedy for the plague was a fig poultice pressed against the boil to draw out the infection. In any case, Hezekiah was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah came by the house to make a pastoral call on the king and said bluntly, “You’re dying. Put your house in order. You don’t have much time left. You’re not going to overcome this.”

Being a king doesn’t make you immune to disease and death. To make matters worse, Hezekiah had no children at this time and therefore had no biological heir to the throne. He was distraught. His life was literally passing before his very eyes. All his hopes and dreams for the kingdom were suddenly moot. His yearning for a son to carry on the kingdom was crushed. At the young age of 39 he assumed, like most of us, that he had plenty of time to accomplish his goals.

It reminds me of the song *100 Years* by the group Five for Fighting. The song is about a 15 year old kid seeing his life at different stages – as a 15 year old kid, a 33 year old father, a 45 year old middle aged man, a 67 year old sage looking back at his youth. Part of the song goes like this: 15, there’s never a wish better than this

When you only got 100 years to live
Half time goes by
Suddenly you’re wise
Another blink of an eye
67 is gone
The sun is getting high
We’re moving on...

That’s where Hezekiah was. He was moving on from youthful vigor to premature death. And he wept. He wept bitterly. He turned his face to the wall so no one could see tears cascade down the king’s face. In his anguish he cried out to God, “God remember how I’ve walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” Hezekiah wasn’t exaggerating. He wasn’t bargaining. He simply was humbling himself before the One he had faithfully served for 14 years. There was no person who could save him. Only God could do it.

Perhaps Hezekiah remembered the Proverb: “The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor” (Prov 15:33). At this point he didn’t fear Sennacherib of Assyria or the Babylonians or any internal threats in Judah. He only feared the Lord and cast himself at the Lord’s feet in humility and helplessness.

The story reminds us that God responds to a humble cry. Before Isaiah left the courts of the palace, God told him to turn around and tell Hezekiah he would have another 15 years to live. God would deliver Hezekiah from his illness and the people of Judah from the armies of the Assyrians. The humility of Hezekiah captured the heart of God who acted on his behalf and on behalf of his people.

Humility is increasingly out of vogue in today’s world. It’s just not cool to be humble. One of the inescapable problems of our day is the promotion of arrogance and self-promotion over humility and self-effacement. Hank Aaron, the great home run king a generation ago would do little more than tip his hat when he ran around the bases after he hit a home run. Jim Brown, the Hall of Fame running back would plow over people on his way to a touchdown and simply hand the referee the football. Now we have home run hitters aided by steroids who stop in their tracks to watch the flight of the ball as if they’ve never seen anyone do it. After scoring a touchdown these days players do a dance, pretend to sign autographs, give a Heisman pose, or show how they can make the ball spin. We have moved from a culture that reminds people of their own limitation to a culture that encourages everyone to think highly of themselves. We’ve adopted the Lake Wobegon effect, that mythical town where “all the children are above average.” Children are raised amid a chorus of applause. Nurturing self-esteem has replaced character development as the top priority for raising kids.

The founding fathers of our nation understood we are dangerous and therefore instituted all sorts of checks and balances into our system of governance. Today, politics has become less and less about fiscal and social restraint and all about the blustering voices of self-promotion. We are condemned to listen to arrogant monologues rather than civil dialogues. Political stunts replace civil discourse. All of this leads to people disengaging from the crudeness of politics because it frustrates their ability to get 100 percent of what they want. People feel no need for balance, correction, and competing voices for truth. The roots of modesty have been carved away. We have forgotten that we are sinners, corrupt, and in need of correction by God and limitation by other humans. We have lost our humility.

In a famous passage, Reinhold Niebuhr put it best: “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. ... Nothing we do, however
virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

The point of all this is that the Christian faith begins in humility, it begins in our acknowledgement of our sinfulness and utter dependence on God for salvation. Hezekiah shed tears recognizing his need for God. We too would do well to cry about our sinfulness and need for correction and restraint. A humble spirit is the beginning of salvation and the foundation of a civil renewal.

Hezekiah acted with humility, but even this man who pleased God allowed pride to sneak up on him a little later.

II. Pride (20:12-19)

During the those 15 years of Hezekiah’s extended life he was visited by some Babylonian officials. The Babylonians and the Assyrians were the two superpowers of the ancient near east. Like today, espionage was integral to their maintenance of power. Two diplomats from Babylon sent Hezekiah gifts and letters wishing him long life and health. They followed with a visit whereupon Hezekiah showed them all his kingdom’s gold, silver, spices, and treasures. There was nothing Hezekiah didn’t show these men. It would be like President Obama welcoming the leaders of Saudia Arabia into the military bases and showing them all the hardware in America’s stockpiles.

Isaiah rebuked Hezekiah for this action. He prophesied that one day the Babylonians would cart off all this wealth to Babylon. They would also take Hezekiah’s sons and make eunuchs of them. In other words, they would end the royal line because of Hezekiah’s foolishness.

We’re not told exactly why Isaiah rebuked Hezekiah so sharply for this diplomatic faux pas. I suspect that Hezekiah wanted to impress the Babylonians with his wealth. Why else would he show them everything he had? He was so proud of the treasures of his kingdom that he lost his head, revealed all his resources to a far away rival, and thereby made himself and descendants vulnerable to future enemies. One commentator said that Hezekiah became a “victim of messianic delusion,” parading his wealth before them just enough to whet their appetite to return 100 years later to cart off all these treasures to Babylon (Is 39). He didn’t realize his vulnerability. His pride caused him to let down his guard and disregard the weaknesses he had as the leader of a kingdom.

I’m sure he didn’t consider the proverb: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16:18). Pride leads to the downfall of men and women who think they are immune to their own weaknesses.

In a 2010 Newsweek column, golfer Tiger Woods offered an honest evaluation of his mistakes as a husband and person. He recognized his sense of invincibility carried over from the golf course into his daily life. The following excerpt reveals our need to depend on others and not be so proud that we can do everything on our own:

“Last November everything I thought I knew about myself changed abruptly, and what others perceived about me shifted too … . My life was out of balance, and my priorities were out of order. I made terrible choices and repeated mistakes. I hurt people whom I loved the most…. Golf is a self-centered game, in ways good and bad. So much depends on one’s own abilities.
But for me, that self-reliance made me think I could tackle the world by myself. It made me think that if I was successful at golf, then I was invincible. Now I know, that no matter how tough or strong we are, we need to rely on others.

Pride manifests itself in so many ways. In Hezekiah’s life it was evident in acting as if he were invulnerable to enemies. There were people and nations determined to exploit him and his wealth for their own good. Hezekiah should’ve known better. Tiger Woods’ pride was manifest in his profligate lifestyle that gave no regard to his family. He pretty much felt he could do anything he wanted to do with no restraint. Our pride may not be so obvious. We’re not kings or golf icons. And yet, how often does pride keep us from admitting our own vulnerability, our own weakness, our struggles. How often do we secretly think, “I’m better than that person. I would never do what he did.” How often do we put others down in our minds, elevating ourselves above them on account of clothing, education, or the achievements praised by the world. How often do we want to do or be better than someone else, rather than simply do the best we can? That’s pride corrupting our strides toward excellence. Pride is the insidious sin that underlies all our sins. And it leads to the destruction of relations with others and the collapse of peace with God.

**Conclusion**

Albert Pujols, the first baseman for the St. Louis Cardinals, is a World Series champ, an eight-time All Star, the recipient of three National League MVP awards, and according to a 2008 poll of 30 MLB managers, the most feared hitter in the sport. He has been in the news this week because failed to sign a contract extension with the owners of his team. He decided if he didn’t sign this week, he wouldn’t think about a contract again until the end of the season. He doesn’t want there to be any distractions while he’s playing. For those who don’t know him very well, they might assume he’s simply out for more money. No doubt he can get more money, but his money may be going for others in need rather than to satisfy his thirst for luxury. The Pujols Family Foundation he started offers support and care to people with Down syndrome and their families, while also helping the poor in the Dominican Republic. He and his wife of ten years provide a loving household for four little children. But most importantly, he is a passionate disciple of Christ.

While speaking at an event at Lafayette Senior High School in Missouri, Pujols told the audience of men and young boys, "As a Christian, I am called to live a holy life. My standard for living is set by God, not by the world. I am responsible for growing and sharing the gospel." Then, after reading Paul's words in Philippians 2:3—"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves"—Pujols told the crowd, "One way for me to stay satisfied in Jesus is for me to stay humble. Humility is getting on your knees and staying in God's will—what he wants for me, not what the world wants." He added: "It would be easy to go out and do whatever I want, but those things only satisfy the flesh for a moment. Jesus satisfies my soul forever."

Our lives are pulled in opposite directions by the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the anti-Christ. Humility pulls us toward God and pride pulls us away from God. Even the greatest characters in the Bible have to guard against pride and intentionally nurture humility. What can we do? Pujols has it right. The way to God comes from a humble spirit. We must constantly fall on our knees and confess our need for God, our attraction to sin, and our need for salvation. When we humble ourselves before God, he will save us from the destruction that waits around the corner. Amen.