Breaking Tyrants

*Isaiah 9:4, “For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.”*

Once upon a time, a mommy duck laid her eggs in a nest by a pond. She lovingly cared for those eggs for weeks. For nearly a month she kept her solemn vigil, sitting on them, incubating them. At last, the big day arrived. The faint sound of pecking rose from the nest, and soon the little ducklings emerged from their eggs. The other ducks and the other animals on the farm raved about all the cute little ducklings . . . except there was one that stood out. It wasn’t petite, it was gangly. It wasn’t bright yellow, it was a dull grey. It wasn’t cute. It was an ugly duckling.

After a time, the ugly duckling felt unwanted, unloved, rejected. He decided to run away and find a place where he felt welcome. But no matter where he went, the outcome was the same. He was laughed at, mocked, and ridiculed. Finally, he resolved to run away from it all, to hide so that no one could make fun of him anymore. He’d be lonely, but even loneliness was preferable to constant abuse. So, that’s what he did. He found a secluded spot among the rushes and reeds. He lived there for weeks, lonely, but undisturbed.

But one day, a bevy of swans swam by. The ugly duckling tried darting behind some weeds, but it was too late. One of the swans spotted him. He called out, “Hey! Aren’t you going to join us?” The ugly duckling couldn’t believe his ears! Surely the swan was talking to someone else! But as he bowed his head trying to figure it out, he looked at the water and saw a swan staring back at him. He wasn’t an ugly duckling after all. He was a beautiful swan! We all know this story. I actually had an ugly duckling experience at the beginning of the week. I discovered something about myself that was pretty surprising. Only, it was the ugly duckling in reverse.

Isaiah 9 is a really powerful passage. Here the prophet speaks of the Assyrian captivity. Assyria had already been a world power. But for one Assyrian, it wasn’t powerful enough. He staged a coups and overthrew the ruling family. He claimed the throne and took the name Tiglath Pileser III. Assyria’s military was already unmatched, but Tiglath Pileser transformed it. It became the world’s first standing professional army. No other nation could equal it. Resistance was pointless. And he was ruthless.

During raids, Tiglath Pileser often slaughtered all captives. He’d then raise their bodies on stakes for the whole city to see. At other times, the Assyrians would put rings through their prisoners’ noses. They’d string a chain through the rings and parade them around. Then they’d devise some horrendous way of executing them. The message was clear. “If you don’t want to die in pain and humiliation, be the slave of Tiglath Pileser III.” That was Isaiah’s context. That was his world, his life.

But in spite of that, Isaiah had a word of hope. In the black of night, Isaiah spoke of dawn. Israel was mourning their dead and Isaiah prophesied joy. There was no doubt that Israel didn’t stand a chance against Assyria. There was no hope. And yet, Isaiah saw a day when Assyria would fall. He saw a day when the world’s superpower would crumble. The tyrant would collapse, and Israel would again breathe the free air. “The yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.” God would free Israel from its oppressor.

But that’s not my situation. When I read that passage, I was sitting in my comfy blue office chair in a temperature controlled room. I had food in my stomach and tea in my mug. I wasn’t in the least concerned that a troop of Assyrians would march through my door and flay me alive. I wasn’t worried about some tyrant plundering my house and enslaving my wife and kids. Isaiah 9 is a beautiful passage, but it doesn’t seem to speak much to me and my situation. And unless you’re worried about Assyrian chariots storming Milford, it probably doesn’t resonate too much with you either. There is a great deal of *dis*continuity between Isaiah’s experience and ours. Frankly, we can’t even imagine life in that situation.

This past Monday morning, I was driving to church. I was pondering that morning’s events and playing them over in my mind. I had gotten frustrated with one of the boys. I had been short with him. Sure, he was misbehaving a little, but I should have suppressed my frustration. I shouldn’t have let it show at all. But I did. They could tell I was annoyed. But I don’t want my sons to grow up knowing an impatient father. I don’t want them to be impatient men but that’s exactly what my actions were teaching them to be. “I’m a lousy father” I thought as I pulled into the parking lot.

On Monday morning as I walked into church, I recollected how I hadn’t helped around the house as willingly as I should have done. I did what I needed to do. I did my chores. But I did them slowly. I sighed occasionally and made sure Justine could hear it. I wanted her to know that I would rather have been doing something else. “I’m a lousy father *and* a lousy husband” I thought as I sat down at my desk.

On my desk was a to-do list, tasks I needed to finish or hadn’t started yet, people I hadn’t called yet but should have called last week. And I still hadn’t come up with a theme for Sunday’s sermon or an understandable way to teach Bible study. And then I remembered how lousy I was as a father and a husband, and it hit me that I was supposed to be the pastor. I was supposed to be demonstrating with my life, all of my life, what God wants for His people. “I’m a lousy Father *and* a lousy husband *and* a lousy pastor. And, oh yeah, I haven’t talked to my mom or brother for more than a week. I’m a lousy son and brother too.”

There once was a bird, convinced it was a swan. It used to swim around the lake, taking itself very seriously. It used to think that it was beautiful and elegant. It used to think it was something to behold. So it would swim around with its head held high. It stretched its neck as long as it would go so that others would see just how wonderful it was. One day, something hit it on the back of the head. Its head bent down so that it faced the water. And there, staring back at it, was an ugly duckling. As I drove to church on Monday, God hit me on the back of the head with His law. As I drove to church on Monday, He reminded me again, and very powerfully, that I am, after all, an ugly duckling.

I could blame it on my sinful nature. I could blame it on being fallible. I try to play the victim of my brokenness. But it was still me who lost my patience with my children. It was still me who was selfish in my marriage. It was still me who hadn’t cared for my neighbor like I should have. I would have loved to blame it on anything else. But I wasn’t the victim. I was the culprit. I was the problem.

I don’t want to do any damage to the people God has placed in my life. I don’t want to hurt them in anyway. I want to nurture them. I want to love them. But sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I’m selfish or lazy, and sometimes I’m selfish and lazy at the same time. On Monday morning I cried out, “God conquer me! *I* have been the oppressor. Conquer me.”

And then I read the Gospel lesson. In some ways it is a fulfillment of the Isaiah passage. It shows Jesus making His way through the Judean countryside. What’s He doing? He’s announcing the coming of God’s kingdom, the arrival of God’s reign. Jesus Himself is bringing it. He goes out and begins dealing with the effects of the broken world. He heals paralytics and epileptics. He gives people relief from their pain. He casts out demons. In short, Jesus was breaking tyrants.

That’s when I realized that Isaiah’s text was speaking directly to me! But not the way I thought it would. Isaiah was right! God is conquering my oppressor! He is breaking the tyrant in my life! Only the tyrant is *me*. I looked around and didn’t see anyone doing any ill to my wife and children. But then I saw my reflection in God’s law. I am the tyrant and God is conquering me. And He is conquering you.

God conquers you when He shows you how hopelessly sinful you are. He conquers you when He shows you that you haven’t done what He’s called you to do and you’re not *even able* to do what He’s called you to do. God conquers you when you fall down before Him with no excuses, no defenses, no self-justifications, and you beg for His mercy. He conquers you and brings you to *nothing* so that He can give you *everything*.

God conquered you through His sacrifice on the cross. He conquered you when water splashed on your head in His triune name. God conquers you when His Son’s body is placed in your hand and His blood is poured in your mouth. God conquers you when the sign of the cross is traced over you, forgiving you of your sin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He conquers you through His grace. And He gives you the opportunity to live a new life. A life lived in loving service to your spouse, your children, your neighbors. A life lived in mercy so that they too might be conquered by His grace.

No, we don’t have to worry about an Assyrian invasion. Our families aren’t oppressed by a foreign overlord. The chances of us being herded out of Milford with rings through our noses are probably quite slim. But Isaiah still speaks to us. Not in the way we expected, but it still speaks to us. Often we ourselves are the oppressors, the ugly ducklings. Often our sinful actions hurt those we love. And yet God promises to break the tyrant. And He does. He breaks us with His Law and reminds us of who we are called to be. He promises to conquer us. And He does. He conquers us through His grace and gives us life forever.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, I know that I’m sinful. I’m not as loving as I should be and sometimes, I even hurt those you placed in my life. Lord, I don’t want to be the oppressor. Conquer me. Thank you for forgiving my sins and raising me to a new life in you. Amen.