

8.10.08                    Frightened, Outnumbered, and Without Resources    2 Kings 6.8-23

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We live in challenging times that are eroding our feelings of safety. Innocent civilians are killed by terrorists and in wars all over the world, our nation is involved in several wars, the US economy is the worst it has been in years, almost everyone is experiencing some financial pain individually and so are churches, non-profits, and businesses. Fear is used as a strategy in politics. If it bleeds it leads on the evening news or on the front page of the newspaper – even the Cape Cod Times – so that we can read about the latest threat, accident, or criminal act over breakfast. A growing number of people are afraid or living with various levels of fear and we live in a relative oasis here on Cape Cod.

There are other fears as well. We fear physical illness or incapacitation. Some of us are concerned about finances or employment. Some of us worry about aging parents while others fear for the kind of world in which we are raising our children and grandchildren who all get exposed to so much at such a young age. We want to protect them as best we can and equip them to survive and thrive in a world very different than the one we grew up in. So many people are living in the grip of fear today and we need to be wise in recognizing that some people want us to live in fear because it gives them power.

With the relentless 24 hour a day media we live with sometimes there can be a tendency to think that no one else has gone through similar circumstances. One of the benefits of living a long time is that hopefully we gain some perspective so that we do not become over confident in good times or overly dismayed, discouraged, or frightened in tough times. Today's scripture is an old story from the book of 2 Kings during the time of the prophet Elisha and it is about fear. Virtually every character we meet is afraid for one reason or another. Listen to the story:

“Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers. He said, *“At such and such a place shall be my camp.”*

But the man of God (Elisha) sent word to the king of Israel,

*“Take care not to pass this place, because the Arameans are going down there.”* The king of Israel sent word to the place of which the man of God spoke.

More than once or twice he warned such a place so that it was on the alert.

The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this; he called his officers and said to them, *“Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?”*

Then one of his officers said, *“No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber.”* He said, *“Go and find where he is; I will send and seize him.”*

He was told, *“He is in Dothan.”* So he sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night, and surrounded the city.

When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city.

His servant said, *“Alas, master! What shall we do?”* He replied,

***“Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.”***

Then **Elisha prayed:** *“O Lord, **please** open his eyes that he may see.”*

So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw;

**the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.**

When the Arameans came down against him, **Elisha prayed** to the Lord, and said, *“Strike this people, **please**, with blindness.”*

So he struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked.

Elisha said to them, *“This is not the way, and this is not the city; follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.”* And he led them to Samaria.

As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, *“O Lord, open the eyes of these men so that they may see.”*

The Lord opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria.

When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha, *“Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?”* He answered, ***“No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master.”*** So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. **And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.**

This story begins in a time of ethnic violence and hostility, much like what the world is witnessing now between Russia and Georgia. Two neighboring nations, with rival political, economic and religious claims are fighting over the same land. Sadly, Aram, now known as Syria, is still in conflict with Israel over the Golan Heights some 2700 years later. This particular incident only happened once. *“Once when the king of Aram was **at war** with Israel...”* Living in a time of war is frightening, no matter how powerful or powerless one is. Every single person in this story is afraid, except for the prophet Elisha. Who do you identify with in the story?

**The king of the Arameans is afraid** because his identity is based on his position as king. He is fearful that someone is betraying him in order to undermine his authority or overthrow him. All his military moves are being made known to the Israelites so he is not able to ambush them. He is fearful that someone on his staff is a traitor giving military secrets to Israel. So he interrogates the officers and staff, *“Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?”* Just like our spy satellites give us an advantage in seeing what is going on in other places, the Israelites also have a spiritual spy satellite – the prophet Elisha. When the king learns that Elisha is the problem he orders his capture. Like the king, our identity can be so wrapped up in what we do rather than who we are; that any perceived threat to our position, authority, or leadership is considered a personal attack to be met with anger, intimidation, and aggression.

Both kings are in positions of power, but both are living in fear. **The king of Israel is afraid** for the obvious reason that he has a hostile neighbor with bad intentions and a seemingly superior force. Israel’s enemy is able to conduct raids and the king is apparently powerless to stop them. If he can’t show greater resolve or effectiveness he may be eliminated by his own people. If the Arameans are victorious, he’s not in an enviable position either. The long term future for defeated kings is not great. Some of us may identify with the king of Israel – he is facing three possible futures, two of which are bad. The odds do not seem to be in his favor. His only hope is one solitary man of God who gives him better reconnaissance reports than his troops. To a pragmatic, political leader, this is a position of last resort. So there are two men in powerful positions, two kings, who are afraid. One because his sense of self comes from his position, the other because he is under attack and has difficulty envisioning a secure future.

**The servant of the prophet Elisha is afraid** that he and his master are dead men. You can imagine his dread when he walked out in early in the morning to bring in the Dothan Times and looking through still sleepy eyes he sees the city surrounded by an army with horses and chariots. The attendant of the man of God is frightened and wakes Elisha with the question, *“Alas, what shall we do?”* He is frightened because as far as he can see, they are surrounded, out numbered, and without resources. There is no way they can send for help, no way out of the city, no escape, no hope. Many people today feel like that servant. The problems around us seem to be closing in, the numbers aren’t favorable, and we lack the resources we need to do all that we want and need to do. We look out on the horizon in the morning beyond on our own immediate circumstances and trouble appears to be encroaching on every side - trouble in large

forms which we seem powerless to stop. What can we do to counter the growing reach of terrorism, the changes in the environment, millions around the world living in abject poverty, the high cost of healthcare, oil, gas, food, and just about anything else, and the never ending warring and killing among nations and people. We look around like the servant of Elisha and say, *“Alas, what shall we do?”* We feel frightened, outnumbered, and without resources. We wonder what one person can do. The answer is, quite a bit, actually.

**The prophet Elisha shows us that an individual with courage and faith in God can make a tremendous difference even in the face of seemingly overwhelming difficulties.** Our kids who were in Vacation Bible School this week learned about that theme also, it was the volunteers who felt frightened and outnumbered! ☺ **Elisha is the only person in the story who is not afraid. Elisha is not frightened because he is the only person in the story whose identity is defined by his relationship with God, not by his position, job, or relationship with someone else.** The kings, the servant, the soldiers are all defined by their position or job. Elisha is known as **“the man of God.” He is defined by who he belongs to.** In one of the beautiful statements in scripture he attempts to reassure his attendant saying, ***“Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.”*** Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, *“Keep your fears to yourself, but share your courage with others.”* That is what Elisha does.

Then Elisha prays that God will enable his servant to see the spiritual resources that are around them. Elisha prayed, *“O Lord, **please** open his eyes that he may see.”* and the Lord opened his eyes and he saw all around them horses and chariots of fire. The stunned servant looked around and said, *“Holy smoke!”* Or something to that effect anyway. As the Arameans moved in to capture Elisha he prays a second time, *“Strike this people, please, with blindness.”* I like the fact that Elisha says, *“please,”* when he prays. It never hurts to be polite and courteous when we pray. Elisha approaches the now disoriented raiders and tells them they are so lost they're not even in the right city. He then leads them on a ten mile walk southwest directly into the city of Samaria, the capital of Israel where the king resides. Elisha prays a third time that the Aramean soldier's sight will be restored and when it is the frightened men realize they are in the city of their enemy. The ambushers have been ambushed.

The king of Israel is terrified that a raiding party of the enemy is inside his capital city. Yet, it is an opportunity for him to crush a foe so he asks Elisha, *“Shall I kill them,*

*shall I kill them?*” That is what is often done to enemies. How do you respond when you finally get an advantage over someone who has been hurting, harming, or bugging you? There is a great temptation to say, “Now it’s my turn.” We do this in subtle ways all the time. Someone says something to us; we’ve got to say something back. Someone tells us something they’re excited about; we have to one up them. Someone cuts us off when we’re driving; we’re going to teach them. I did this for you – you didn’t reciprocate. I sacrificed for you and this is the thanks that I get. When we’re into paybacks and getting even the cycle of hostility and violence cannot be stopped. It simply continues consuming more and more people. Human beings seem to respond with hostility more readily than reconciliation.

But a man or woman of God can step in and work for reconciliation. Elisha had been preventing bloodshed by warning his king about the Aramean’s plans. Now he acts to move the fighting neighbors from hostility to hospitality.

In response to the king’s question about killing the soldiers, Elisha says, *“No! Give them a great feast and send them back to their master.”* Elisha’s kindness and hospitality are in direct contrast to the way things are usually done between people who are fighting. His kindness returns to Aram many men who will testify to the power of Israel’s God to protect his people. Elisha’s act also anticipates the teaching of Jesus and that of Paul in Romans 12:19-21, **“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

The Arameans were so overcome by the hospitality of the king and the power of God at work in the prophet Elisha that they stopped raiding Israel. God’s ways are not our ways, which is often hard for us to understand or to live. God’s vengeance may take the form of feeding our enemies. In the comic, *Jump Start*, a mother and her adult son have the following exchange: *“Don’t touch that sweet potato pie!” “Don’t tell me it’s for the church.” “It’s for Morris, our neighbor.”*

*“Morris?! That horrible old man next door?! The guy who walks his mangy dog on your front lawn and then laughs at you? The guy who puts his garbage in your trash cans late at night? The guy who tells you he hates you to your face?”* The mom says, *“Son, only love can conquer hate.”* The son turns to his wife and asks, *“Where does she come up with this stuff?”* She replies, *“God only knows.”*

Today's Bible story begins in hostility and ends in reconciliation. Like the servant there may be times we feel frightened, outnumbered, and without resources. But thanks to the prayers of a man of God – enemies are reconciled, bloodshed is avoided, and the world is perceived in a new way. The prayers of a person saturated with faith can lead to reconciliation, dignity, and freedom from fear. If we fight on the world's terms or our enemy's terms, we're likely to fail. Spiritual vision is necessary so that we can see our problems, troubles, and even confrontations through the eyes of God. God's way will often be surprising and not at all one we would have conceived.

This story invites us to be people of faith, courage, and prayer like Elisha; to be people whose identity is found in a relationship with God that no problem and no enemy can ever sever. We can live believing that we do not have to be afraid because, *“there are more with us than there are with them.”*

We can believe with Elisha and the psalmist that the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them.

The movie, *The Bear*, is a nice film about a young bear trying to survive alone in the wilderness. In time, the cub befriends a very large male bear who has been wounded by hunters. At the end of the movie the young bear is being chased by a mountain lion that is much bigger and looking to eat the young bear. After a chase, the mountain lion catches up to the little bear and they begin to fight. The lion draws blood and you fear for the little bear's life. Suddenly the little bear rears up on his hind legs and growls a growl which is so ferocious that the lion breaks off its attack and flees. As the little bear roars again, the camera swings around and we see behind the little bear, the huge bear who has become the little bear's surrogate father. It is his roar and his strength that caused the enemy to flee. **“Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.”**

This Bible story, as most do, lifts up an alternative way of perceiving reality. It hints at new ways of seeing, new ways of facing our fears, new ways of treating our enemies and solving our conflicts. We live in a world of seemingly impossible possibilities. *“If your enemy is hungry feed him.”* This story begins in hostility and ends in reconciliation. George Carey, when he was the Archbishop of Canterbury, said in a speech on the role and responsibility of religion, *“Let us recall some of the fundamentals of Christianity which go to the very heart of reconciliation. It is posited on a purpose and power beyond ourselves: the tyranny of “me” and “my perspective” is broken. Christianity insists on justice, because we have a*

*common Creator who loves every person equally. It teaches that we are all fallible and in need of God's grace, and this should undermine the pride which makes it difficult to compromise or say sorry.*

*Our God of forgiveness encourages us to forgive those who sin against us. Those are indeed the essential elements of reconciliation."*

Blessing:

The Lord is our light and our salvation; there is no one we shall fear.

The Lord is the stronghold of our life, we need not be afraid. (Psalm 27 adapted)

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 1 Thessalonians 5:15