

Faith Mennonite Church
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Seek Peace and Pursue It
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Peace with Enemies: A matter of perception
2 Kings 6:8-23

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

Fear not! Do not be afraid! These words are repeated time and again throughout scripture. “Fear not, I am with you” says the voice of God to men and to women when they are confronted with daunting challenges...when they are surrounded by enemies...when they feel abandoned and forsaken. “Do not be afraid!” said Jesus to those who feared they didn't have enough...to those who faced persecution or the rough waves of a storm...to his disciples as they followed him into conflict and death.

Fear not, says God, because no matter what you are seeing, no matter how threatening the circumstances may look, another reality waits to be unveiled. It's all a matter of perception. Alternative realities and the ability to perceive them are at the heart of the story we read this morning. There are reversals and surprises all around!

Let us begin with the context of this story, which is found in the 2nd book of Kings. The two books of Kings tell tales of many kings, beginning with Solomon, the successor to King David. Rather than a celebration of monarchy, however, these books offer a critique of the rule of kings. The real heroes of the stories are two prophets: Elijah, who comes on the scene in the final chapters of 1 Kings, and Elisha, his successor, whose story is told in first half of 2 Kings. Both of these prophets represent an alternative vision to the rule of kings and the wars they make. They show God's power among the poor and powerless. They show God's love that extends itself to the enemy: to the foreign military leader Naaman who was healed from a serious skin disease, and to a whole army in today's story.

Let's look at the reversals and contrasting perceptions in this story:

The nation of Israel had divided into two kingdoms: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. The setting of today's story is one of tension between the northern kingdom of Israel and its neighbor to the northeast, Aram. These two countries would take turns raiding each other on a regular basis. On this occasion, Aram was the invader. Two kings appear in the story—the king of Aram at the beginning and the king of Israel at the end. But notice: neither has a name! The only person named in the story is Elisha, the prophet.

Besides lacking names, these kings lack sensibility. The king of Aram can't figure out why the Israelites are always escaping from his strategic strikes. Clueless, he suspects a traitor from within, someone who is sharing his plans with the other side. But one of his officers, who is obviously more in the know, speaks up to say that he's not dealing with a traitor. The enemy is a man of God, a prophet who has access to the king's most intimate conversations—those spoken

in his bedroom! The king then demands a search for this prophet, but a search isn't necessary. His officers know exactly where Elisha is: "He is in Dothan," they say. So the clueless king sends his informed army to go and capture him.

Although the officers know that nothing can be kept secret from Elisha, they approach under the cover of darkness, trying to stay hidden. When Elisha's servant gets up the next morning and goes outside, he sees the approaching army and he panics. "What do we do? An army surrounds the city!"

Elisha replies calmly: "there are more with us than there are with them." Then he prays that his servant will see "the more." And indeed he does. He sees "horses and chariots of fire" in the mountains surrounding Elisha. This same image appeared in the text a few chapters earlier (2:11-12) when Elisha's predecessor and mentor, Elijah, was about to die and was carried away to heaven by chariots of fire. That experience no doubt remained with Elisha, providing a strong spiritual link both to his departed mentor and also to the presence of God.

Aram's army, however, does not see what Elisha and his servant have seen and they march in to capture Elisha. Elisha returns to the only weapon he possesses: prayer. Our English translation renders an opposite prayer from the one he prayed for his servant: This time he prays that that they be struck with blindness. A more accurate rendering of the Hebrew is a bit more of a play on words: Elisha prays that the same light will become blinding to them. What the servant saw and interpreted as God's protective presence became only a blinding light to Aram's army. Blinded, they do not recognize Elisha and they take him at his word when he says that they're not where they intended to be. He promises to lead them to the right place.

Off they go to Samaria, the capitol of Israel, and right to the king of Israel--the other king without a name. Like the clueless king of Aram, the king of Israel speaks impetuously, like a young child at Christmas who jumps to conclusions about what a gift represents before opening it. "Do we get to kill them?" he asks, "Do we get to kill them?" assuming that these are *his* prisoners of war.

Once again Elisha answers in his calm, cool way: "What makes you think these are prisoners of war? You didn't capture them with your forces!" "No," says Elisha, "I have brought you guests, you need to feed them!" Sharing a meal was something people did in those days to seal a pact of peace. Elisha's ability to see a spiritual reality of God at work outside of the human systems of conflict and power led him to creatively transform an enemy into a guest. And God still calls his people to this work!

Last week before going to Nebraska for the Central Plains Conference Annual Meeting, knowing that an announcement would be made concerning the marriage guidelines we adopted earlier this year, I prayed for strength to trust in God's work. But fear has its way of creeping in and I realized I was not sleeping well. On Saturday morning, the day the announcement was to be made, Gerald and I got up and each had a time of prayer. He was using a guide from the Liturgical Press at St. John's Abbey that included a reading from Jeremiah 29:11-14a:

11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. 12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, 14 I will let you find me, says the Lord.

When Gerald shared the scripture with me, he also shared an image that had come to him: he had seen a nest, made of sharp twigs, gathered together to create a place of safety and comfort.

I carried this scripture and the image of the nest with me as I met to pray with our conference moderator, Blaine Friesen, before the morning sessions began. As the morning proceeded, I did not see chariots of fire and none of us were blinded by the light, but as people came up later to express support, to offer prayer, and in one case to challenge, their words quietly conveyed the voice of God: “Be not be afraid!”

We will have more work within our conference in the coming months, and next Sunday our theme is “peace in the broader church.” I hope this story of Elisha and the words from Jeremiah will guide and encourage us. God calls us to trust and see the amazing power of God’s Spirit; we do not work by our simple human power alone. God calls us to trust in the transforming power of hospitality as we welcome everyone, even those who challenge and oppose us, as invited guests.