

9.26.21 Elisha – What Do You Do When You’re Afraid 2 Kings 6.8-23
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We’re living in challenging times for reasons I don’t need to list because we hear about them every day. Beyond the larger scale reasons why people are afraid, worried, stressed, or anxious, there are more personal fears as well. You may fear physical illness, diminishment, or death. Some of you are concerned about finances or employment. Some of you worry about aging parents while others fear for the kind of world in which we are raising our children and leaving to our grandchildren. We want to 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 see it in the anger, the short-temperedness, irrationality, violence, and the lack of kindness, compassion, and empathy that are on display every day. You need wisdom to recognize that some people want you to live in fear because it gives them power and makes them money.

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 difficult circumstances. One of the benefits of living a long time is that hopefully you gain some perspective so that you don’t become overconfident in good times or overly dismayed, discouraged, or frightened in tough times. Today’s scripture is a story from the book of 2 Kings during the life of the prophet Elisha and it’s a tough time of war. The story is about fear. Almost every character we meet is afraid for one reason or another. Listen to **2 Kings 6.8-23**:

“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; & 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 violence and hostility. 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 some level of conflict with Israel over the Golan Heights some 2700 years later. The story begins by telling us it is a time of war. *“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. As I talk about each one of them, think about who 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 to undermine his authority or overthrow him. All his military moves are being made known to the Israelites, so he isn't able to ambush them. He's fearful 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 spy satellites give a nation 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. The fear of not being able to find a keep a job that pays a livable wage, losing a job in a changing economy or even making the transition to retirement after having worked for most of our life, all of these are moments when our identity can feel threatened because for much of our life our identity can be wrapped up in what we do.

Both kings are in positions of power, but both are living in fear. **The king of Israel is afraid because he has a hostile neighbor with bad intentions and a seemingly superior force.** Israel's enemy can conduct raids and the king of Israel 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 good. Some of us may identify with the king of Israel in that he's facing three possible futures, two of which are bad. The odds don't seem to be in his favor. His only hope is a 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 a hostile 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, outnumbered, 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 appear to lack the resources and the will to do what needs to be done. We look out on the horizon in the morning beyond 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 violence, the changes in the environment, millions around the world living in abject poverty, and the never-ending conflict among peoples and nations? 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 according to this scripture is, quite a bit.

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. 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. What a difference it makes to have our identity anchored in our relationship with God. In one of the beautiful statements in scripture Elisha 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, as well as when we do anything else. 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 fearful men realize they’re 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’s 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’s 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 just goes on and on. 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 into a situation and be an instrument of 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 Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5.1-16, 38-48 and Paul’s teaching in Romans 12.1-21, especially verses 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 rather than killing them.**

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. 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 come up with on our own.

There may be times when you feel frightened, outnumbered, and without resources like Elisha’s servant. This scripture invites you to be a person of faith, courage, and prayer like Elisha; to be a person whose identity is found in a relationship with God that no problem and no enemy can sever. We can live believing that we do not have to be afraid because, *“there are more with us than there are with them.”* You can believe with Elisha and the psalmist that the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them (Psalm 34:7).

The Bible story from 2 Kings advocates for 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 hospitality and reconciliation.

When he was the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey 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.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What is one thing you are afraid of today? What is it about that “thing” that frightens you?
2. Both the Kings in the story in 2 Kings 6.8-23 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. What sorts of fears get triggered when your identity and sense of self gets too tied up in what you do, rather than who you are? How do you respond when you feel threatened or under attack?
3. Elisha’s servant is frightened because as far as he can see, they are surrounded, outnumbered, and without resources. He looks at their situation and says, “Alas, what shall we do?” What do you do when you feel that way?
4. Elisha is the only person in the story who is not afraid because he is the only person whose identity is defined by his relationship with God, not by his position, job, or relationship with someone else. He is “the man of God.” How does knowing deeply and surely that you belong to God, help you when you’re afraid?
5. Why is it important for breaking cycles of violence, revenge, and retribution for the “children of God” to be instruments of reconciliation and hospitality rather than

hostility as Elisha demonstrates in 2 Kings 6? What would it look like if Christians in America took this seriously and tried to live it out?

6. How does Elisha's response anticipate Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5.1-16, 38-48 and Paul's teaching in Romans 12.1-21? Read those passages and think of how many ways you see them reflected in 2 Kings 6.8-23
7. What is one thing you'll take from this story that you'll try to incorporate into your life?