

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM
August 6, 2017

2 Kings 6:8-17 Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, "I will set up my camp in such and such a place."

9 The man of God sent word to the king of Israel: "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there." 10 So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places.

11 This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, "Tell me! Which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?"

12 "None of us, my lord the king," said one of his officers, "but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom."

13 "Go, find out where he is," the king ordered, "so I can send men and capture him." The report came back: "He is in Dothan." 14 Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city.

15 When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?" the servant asked.

16 "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

17 And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

"Your Enemies Are No Match for God"

This past week I had the chance to catch up with a family member who is currently serving in the military. We went over a pretty substantial list of challenges our nation and our military could be facing in the near future. Of course, there could always be some surprise emergency that pops up in an unexpected spot on the globe. Tensions between the United States and Russia or Iran or North Korea are already tricky. This family member expressed complete confidence in the power and technological superiority of the United States military as well as complete confidence in the men and women who will be carrying out those orders. And yet, as an individual citizen, he expressed some misgivings. If things escalate quickly with any of those nations, things could get very dangerous very soon. Winning isn't the only concern. There most certainly would be loss of life in any major conflict. Damage will be inflicted on all sides. Public opinion may be the trickiest factor of all to control and the fallout in our national psyche could be the hardest thing to repair over the next years. So in other words, our military has the capability to win an all out war, but he's not sure if our country could stomach what it would take to actually win it.

There is winning. Then there is feeling safe. One doesn't always guarantee the other.

That's exactly what we encounter in these verses from 2 Kings chapter 6 today. Israel's enemies were plotting against them. The king of a neighboring country was devising a strategy to attack Israel. But all those plans were frustrated. No matter how carefully and secretly the military campaign was put in place, no matter the strength of the military force, God kept frustrating their plans. God didn't use conventional warfare, but outnumbered and overmatched those enemies. This whole encounter gives us great comfort in God's presence and power. We have the unseen, but certain and constant presence of God to help. And it's not just that God is up for this particular challenge. It's that your enemies are no match for God.

God had allowed the Prophet Elisha to warn the King of Israel. So every time the enemy armies attacked, Israel was ready. The King of Aram didn't take too kindly to his plans being crushed. Actually, **"this enraged the King of Aram."** (2 Kings 6:11) And once he figured out Elisha was behind his frustration, he was determined to put a stop to his military defeats by putting a stop to Elisha.

But there's the problem again. Israel was winning. But not everyone in Israel was feeling safe and secure. We feel overmatched in our own lives because we face real threats. Real dangers cause real anxiety. Even people of faith can recognize real enemies and real dangers.

But we feel overmatched because we feel like we have to face all our fears all on our own. You hear about another tragedy that just makes you shake your head. What else can you do? You just soldier on. You experience conflicts with difficult people in your life. You can't take a day off or things will just blow up. You face conflict inside your family. You feel like your fate is in someone else's hands. There's only so much you can do about it now, you just have to hope it turns out in your favor. Life seems too much. You feel like you are just a character being controlled by someone's joystick.

Here's one of the most surprising things about this whole episode. The King of Aram is frustrated that he isn't able to successfully attack Israel. He identifies Elisha as the source of his frustration. And his spies then have no trouble finding out where to find the prophet. Figuring out his location meant the king's next step was simple: **"Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city."** (2 Kings 6:14) Sounds too easy to me. Why didn't Elisha take the proper precautions? Didn't he understand the risks of interfering in military matters and geopolitical power struggles? Was he being overconfident or just naive? Actually, Elisha has another important lesson to teach us. Elisha teaches us a first lesson, that God is always there. Even if unseen, we have his constant and certain presence to help us. But Elisha also rebukes our fears and encourages us to push forward, go on with life with God.

When Elisha's helper got up early the next morning to see the army encamped around them, he reacted naturally: **"Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?"** (2 Kings 6:15) You know what to do when you feel overmatched. You turn to your ever-present God to be your helper. You turn to God in prayer. You bring your burdens and your cares before his throne.

You empty yourself of your anxiety and leave it there with God. Behind those words stand real fear because of real enemies.

At least most of it. That's the irony of God's children. You and I appeal to God to help us in situations when no human power can bail us out any more. Then we hold onto a sliver of doubt that God really can or will help. It's just the way we protect ourselves. We know disappointment. We know how often we have been let down. We know what it feels like to trust too much in the people around us. We can't help but keep our options open. Our cries echo those of Elisha's servant: "What can we do?!"

Recent reports have highlighted an increase in suicides. That would be tragic enough, but that increase has come among Jr High School students. Any articles bringing this trend to light typically offer some sort of explanation about this disturbing trend. But you know that basic reason. Despair. People feel trapped. There is no way out. No solutions. Maybe it is even one last fleeting attempt to cling to some kind of control as the world seems to spin out of control.

There is no indication that Elisha's servant was suicidal in 2 Kings chapter 6. And we're not here today to beat up on people who feel trapped by a vicious cycle of despair. But we want to shine a light on the fear that leads to hopelessness to provide a solution. When panic seized the heart of Elisha's servant, when his heart gave way because of what he saw, there seemed like no possibility for escape. But there was a solution better than despair. Elisha prayed: **"Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see."** (2 Kings 6:17) Despair sets in because you have placed your hope in something besides God. It really boils down to a First Commandment issue. The things you hope for and place your trust in and define your identity and value in life, will always let you down. 100% guaranteed. Because they aren't designed to do what only God can do for you.

Which makes me wonder why God would allow Elisha and his servant to experience such an unnerving situation. Actually, it's the same reason why Jesus allowed his disciples to struggle out on that lake. Most of Jesus' miracles have clear beneficiaries. It's not hard to figure out why Jesus healed someone who couldn't see or brought someone back from the dead. But why was he out there walking on top of the lake in the first place? After all, they had just witnessed Jesus feed over 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. They knew his power. They had a growing understanding of his capabilities. But they didn't yet completely understand. God himself was right there with them. His divine power was right there at their disposal. Whatever the situation, no matter how bad things seem, the Savior is always there.

So for your faulty prayer life, Jesus wants you to pray "open my eyes." For the doubts that linger in our hearts, Jesus needs to open our eyes. For all the times we give into momentary despair, we need to see. God wants you to experience just how overmatched you are. It has to sink in. You can't fix this. You can't make everything better. You don't have the power to overcome all your enemies. But God does.

Dear God, open my eyes. Open my eyes to see you as more than just a helper and provider. You are my Conqueror. Open my eyes God to know that you are more than near to me. You are in the middle of the fray. Open my eyes to see that you aren't behind me pushing me to overcome my fear. You are fighting my battles. Open my eyes God to see that in Jesus Christ, you are for me.

In today's second Bible lesson we hear absolute confidence from the Apostle Paul. Paul knew his last day was drawing near. Yet he could confidently say: **"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."** (2 Timothy 4:7,8) The Righteous Judge seems like the last person we would want to face when confronted by the terrors of death. But once we get over the cry of Elisha's servant "what shall we do?" then we can move on to celebrate what God has already done. A God who is for you isn't here to punish you for all your mistakes, but send you a Savior. A God who is for you doesn't give you a boost of power or another instruction manual, but sends His Son to do the work you couldn't complete. A God who is for you covers all of your doubts and hopelessness, all your helplessness and despair in the blood of Jesus Christ. A God who is for you knows your insecurities and anxieties and so he delivers to you the crown of Jesus' righteousness as your gift.

Have you ever heard of asymmetrical warfare? We think it is noble to fight fair. But you don't want to go into any war where the odds are even. We want to make sure we engage in conflict when the chances for victory are as close to guaranteed as humanly possible.

Once the Lord opened the eyes of Elisha's servant, his fear melted away: **"Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."** (2 Kings 6:17) The conflict is happening in here, in our hearts. Because the "out there" conflict God has perfectly under control. God has defeated our greatest enemies. God's enemies are overmatched and outnumbered. God is up to every challenge you face. God enjoys supreme power over your enemies. God has work to do in here. God wants you to know he is fighting asymmetrical battles on your behalf. Know that your all-powerful and all-knowing God is always with you. Accept that you are never overmatched with your overpowering God. Trust him as he fights for you. Your enemies are no match for God. Amen.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him. Amen.