

2 Kings 6.8-23: Feeding Your Enemies

The Intro

September 11, 2001, a day that will live in our memories forever. I had always heard of that phenomenon, people remembering where they were when they heard that President Kennedy had been shot, but I didn't really have an event in my youth that stuck like that. September 11 is that kind of event though. Do you remember where you were? I do. I was living at a camp called Mount Hermon, in Santa Cruz. I was just transitioning from my summer camp responsibilities to my school year duties. I had moved up the mountain to a house across from the high school camp and I was preparing to teach Outdoor Science to 5th and 6th graders. On that morning, I had gotten up around 6 AM, 9 AM Eastern Time, right around the time that the planes hit the towers. I had gotten up early to go get some coffee and doughnuts for our staff-bonding trip to the lake. While I was getting doughnuts, I vaguely remember someone talking in the doughnut shop about planes attacking something. I didn't think much of it because I hadn't gotten my coffee yet and I didn't really know what they were talking about, maybe a movie they had seen or a video game they had played. When I had gotten my doughnuts and coffee, I headed back to camp to pick up one of my roommates. The first thing he said when he got in the car was, "Hey, did you hear that they are attacking America with planes or bombs or something?" I said, "No, what are you talking about? Somebody at the doughnut shop was talking about planes, but I didn't really catch what he was saying." So we turned on the radio to hear the news that planes had hit the World Trade Center Towers. I was in shock; I didn't know what to think. Is this real? The thought of Orson Welles' broadcast of "War of the Worlds" went through my head. Is this some sort of radio program? When are they going to stop and take a commercial break and announce that it's just a show? But

that didn't happen. We got to our director's house and turned on the news and watched the events unfold; we watched the first tower collapse; we sat there stunned, like the rest of America. "What is going on?" We gathered together and prayed...

What a horrific event, certainly "a date which will live in infamy." However, there was also something else surrounding those events that stuck in my mind: I strongly remember the response around the world in the days following that tragedy. I remember the outpouring of grief and sympathy. There were candlelight vigils in many countries, even Muslim ones. I actually thought the Muslim countries would think it served the United States right. After all, the U.S. is not well loved because of its dominating military, economy, and culture. But I was wrong. Not only were the U.S.'s friends like Great Britain mourning with it, but so were people in Iran, one of America's long-standing enemies. At the main soccer stadium in Iran's capital city, a full minute of silence was taken to show solidarity with the people of the United States in their great loss and suffering. Another thing that amazed me was the support in Palestine, people that haven't had much love for the U.S. Despite this, over 1 million Palestinian students stood in silence for **five whole minutes** to show their sympathy for the United States. The world was grieving with the U.S. over this tragedy.

I knew what was coming next; heads would roll over this; the United States would flex its military might and go after whoever planned these horrific acts. I heard sermons based on Romans 13 preparing Christians for this possibility, where Paul writes that "the governing authority...is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil." But at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if the United States didn't respond with violence? **(Pause)** I wondered with such unanimous support and solidarity for the United States around the world, and such despising for these acts of terrorism, what if the U.S. didn't respond

with guns and bombs, what if it responded with food and drink? What if instead of causing broken bodies and blood to flow in the streets, it caused broken bread and wine to flow in those same streets? How would the world have responded if, instead of attacking Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. had sent food and medical supplies to those mostly poor countries? What would the terrorists have done? Would they have lost all their new recruits? Would they have second-guessed their actions? Would they have been destroyed by their own people for their despicable crimes against humanity?

The world will never know because that's not the route the U.S. took. Nor am I suggesting that it should have. I was just wondering out loud. After all, it is not the call of the nations to feed their enemies. But it is the call of the Church to do so.

The Word

Today's passage focuses on Elisha, the prophet, the man of God, the one who feeds his enemies. The story starts out with Elisha eavesdropping on the plans that the king of Aram makes in private with his officers, even those in his bedroom! Elisha takes this information and relays it to the king of Israel, so that he is prepared when he travels to those places, and in this way averts destruction. Well, as you can imagine, the king of Aram is slightly perturbed...that's an understatement. Actually, he wants heads to roll because he thinks it must be someone in his own army who is tipping off the king of Israel to his secret plans. But his officers insist that this is not the case; it is the prophet Elisha in Israel who can read the mind of the king of Aram. The Arameans knew where to find Elisha, in Dothan. So the king of Aram sends out a great army to go get this spy who is ruining his plans for conquest over Israel. Now this seems a bit of comic relief. For if Elisha already knows about when and where the king of Aram is going to attack, how does the king expect to catch this guy?! He goes after the man of **God** with an army of **men**...good luck.

Now here comes the fun! The army of Aram arrives at Dothan and surrounds it in the middle of the night, waiting for the morning light to attack. Elisha's servant wakes up early to see this spectacle: a great army seeking him and his master...they're toast! But Elisha doesn't close his eyes in fear of the army; no, he's probably seen this coming. He calmly replies, "Don't be afraid. Those with us are more than those who are with them." Even though the Bible doesn't mention it, I can hear his servant clearly: "What are you talking about Elisha? Are you mad? Are you seeing things? There's an army out there and only two of us." So Elisha prays, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." And this time, when Elisha's servant looks around, he doesn't just see the Aramean army, he sees another army. The Bible says that the hills around Elisha were filled with horses and chariots of fire! This is no ordinary army; this is the army of God's angels. That's why this man of God can be so calm when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, because he knows and even sees who is in control.

But the Arameans obviously can't see that they are outnumbered, for they begin to attack. Elisha prays to the Lord again, "Strike these people with blindness." And so Elisha's servant has moved from blindness to sight, and the Arameans have moved from sight to blindness. God reverses the dire fortunes. I love the humor in the Bible in the next scene. While the Bible doesn't say it, I imagine Elisha approaches the Arameans and probably first asks who they're looking for. When he hears, I imagine he has a big smirk on his face. This is funny! God dupes a whole army! They can't see Elisha laughing at them anyway. Elisha says, "This isn't the way and this isn't the city. Follow me and I'll take you to the man you're looking for."

So Elisha marches them about 11 miles south to Samaria. Now remember, this is the time of the Divided Kingdom; there is Judah in the South and Israel in the north, and Samaria is the capital city of Israel. Therefore, Elisha marches the army of Aram right into the heart of Israel.

Elisha prays to the Lord, asking that they may see again, and they do, but they must be terrified by their surroundings; they're staring death in the face! The king of Israel is ecstatic at seeing his enemies being delivered into the palm of his hand. He says, "Can I kill them Elisha? Can I kill them?"

Now you'd think from the rest of the Old Testament stories you know, that God delivered the Arameans into the hand of Israel, Israel wiped them out, and they weren't a problem anymore. But that's not God's intention here. Elisha isn't on the side of Israel, he's on God's side, and God has a different plan to bring an end to the violence. Elisha tells the king of Israel to make a feast for the army of Aram. So the king prepares a feast and every one of them ate and drank their full and returned home in peace. And the storyteller concludes, "Oh, by the way, the army of Aram, they didn't attack Israel anymore."

The Lesson in Its Context

This is a fascinating story in so many ways! And I want to focus on two things from it: First, who's in control, and second, how does that affect the way Elisha deals with this situation?

First, who's in control. God is in control. While the Bible doesn't say it directly, it is obvious that God must be the one giving spiritual insight to Elisha to disrupt the secret plans of the king of Aram. God uses sight to comfort the doubting servant of Elisha. God uses blindness and sight again, to subdue the army of Aram. You don't hear the name of God as often as the name Elisha in this story, but with all the miracles going on, it is obvious he's at work. God is in full control.

Second, how does the fact that God is in control affect Elisha's dealings with the army of Aram? Although Elisha works in the beginning of the story to protect his home nation from attack, he is not just concerned about the welfare of his own people. In fact, that's never the role of the prophets in the Old Testament. Their job is to relay God's words and agenda whether they are for

their home nation or against it, and they are more often than not against it. Elisha is concerned throughout the story with carrying out God's agenda, and here, that means peace. Because of Elisha's sight, the eyes of faith which can perceive who is in control, he is calm, he averts secret attacks, he assures his servant, he doesn't run from the task, he doesn't give in to the interests of his king, he even feeds his enemies.

The Conclusion in Our Context

What does this story mean for us, the Church? Who do we identify with in this story? With Elisha, with the servant, with the king of Israel? I know we respond like Elisha's servant at times. We cower with fear over some seemingly insurmountable odds in our lives. We may try to runaway and hide, to protect ourselves, not looking for God's hand to care for us. Or we may take matters into our own hands and lash out in fear. Sometimes we may respond like the king of Israel, who when he has the opportunity to strike down his enemies, he wants to go for it. When the chips are in our favor, it is so tempting to repay those who hurt us, maybe strike them on the cheek instead of turning the other, maybe slipping a bit of gossip into a conversation when they aren't around, maybe to say "I told you so" when they are down. This is what we do when we can't see who is in control; we take matters into our own hands seeking to save ourselves. And, if we can't see who's in control, it even makes sense to align ourselves with the powerful, to let our government take care of our enemies so we don't have to deal with them. You know, to save ourselves.

But that is not what the Bible tells us to do. If we can see who's in control, then we don't have to save ourselves. In fact, the Bible tells us to do quite the opposite; it tells us to do dangerous things; not to avoid conflict, but to maybe even put ourselves in harms way. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, not trying to make ourselves **feel** a certain way for them, but to **do** certain things for them. Why? Because that's what God does. In Matthew 5, Jesus reminds us that God brings the

sun and the rain to sustain both the good and the evil. In Romans 12.17-21 Paul writes that Christians are not to repay evil for evil. I can't help but think that he had this story of Elisha in mind when he wrote it. Let's take a look at it.

Today's passage from Elisha's life is a powerful reminder of who is in control. God is in control and we must recognize this fact. This reminds me of a more recent story about one of our sisters in Christ, Mother Teresa. There is a great documentary film recounting her life. One event in this film occurred in 1982. At that time, Israel was in a raging battle with the Palestinians, bombing the daylights out of Beirut. In one of the most war-torn sections of the city sat an orphanage for mentally handicapped children. Snipers were everywhere and the primary target for the Israelis was less than five miles from where the orphanage sat. Against the advice of church leaders and government officials, Mother Teresa was determined to go in and bring the children out to safety. The battle was raging, so Mother Teresa lit a candle and calmly began to pray. Within an hour there was silence. The next day she went in and brought 37 mentally handicapped children and their staff to safety. Though everyone told her that it was a foolish thing to do and that she and others would likely be killed, she believed. That took the vision of Elisha, the eyes of faith. Mother Teresa understood that God is in control.

When I was preparing this sermon, I was trying to think of an example of feeding enemies, but I couldn't think of any. It's not something that happens very often on the personal level. And feeding enemies is generally not the business of nations. Quite the opposite actually, nations embargo their enemies, trying to starve them into submission. However, God says the business of feeding enemies is the business of the Church. I didn't really expect the United States to feed its enemies after 9-11 as a way to overcome evil with good, but that is exactly what God calls Christians to do. Prophets always play the role of God's voice between the nations, not for one

over the other, like Elisha in this story. And like Elisha, God calls the Church to be Christ's body in the world, seeking peace in and with all nations, not one over another. The United States is not called to be the Church in the world, that's the Church's calling. To seek peace both for the nation it is in and for other nations. After all, if the Church favors one nation over another, in the end, Christians will be killing Christians.

So we must remember the vision of Elisha that God is surrounding us with horses and chariots of fire. Don't quit, don't give in to violence, to back-biting, to cheating, to doing hateful actions to your enemies. Don't run away from your enemies either; don't isolate yourselves with the goal of saving your life; that's not what God calls us to do. Feed your enemies and give them something to drink; overcome evil with good. Why? Because God is in control. So rest in Elisha's vision: "Don't be afraid. There are more with us than there are with them."

Prayer

O Lord, open our eyes that we may see; see that you are in control; see that you are for us, and that we don't have to fear those who are against us. With this vision, give us strength and love to seek peace in this world of wars, to have the courage to feed our enemies, to overcome evil with good. Amen.