FMC July 30, 2023 2 Kings 6:8-23

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Hostility or Hospitality?

 When I think about this story of Elisha and the Aramean army, I think of a Shakespearean comedy, perhaps A Midsummer’s Night Dream, which is a comedy of confused relationships, conflict between a fairy king and queen, and actors who provide comedic relief before the resolved and happy ending. By his actions, Puck, the mischievous protagonist in the play, sets events in motion.

 In our text today there is the confused relationship between the Man of God and the Aramean (or Syrian) army, who find the man they are seeking only to believe he is a guide who will lead them to the object of their search. There is the political conflict between the King of Aram and the King of Israel, and there is the comedic act of sending a large army to capture a single man, only to have that lone prophet instead capture the large army. including horses and chariots. There is also the happy ending: a feast for the warring characters who are then released to return home. Like the play, there is also a protagonist who directs the actions and direction of the plot. Unlike Puck, the protagonist in our story is Yahweh, who acts to bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

 I’m not sure what we make of this story. Is it political satire or morality play or simply miracle? It is the second of three miracle stories related to Elisha in 2 Kings chapter 6. They follow the story of the Syrian general Naaman in the previous chapter. Naaman suffers from leprosy. A servant girl captured by the Aramean army tells Naaman about Elisha, the prophet who could cure him. Naaman seeks out Elisha and after obeying Elisha’s words to bathe in the Jordan River, he is healed of his leprosy.

 Aram historically occupied the land encompassed by Syria and some translations use the name Syria instead of Aram. During Elisha’s time the northern kingdom of Israel often suffered from raiding parties out of Aram who took captives and plundered the land. It was a time of political conflict between two groups of people.

 The story begins in the court of the king of Aram. He believes he has a traitor, a spy who is telling the king of Israel his plans. Every time he sends raiding parties into Israel, it is as though the Israelites know his plans and are forewarned. This happens time and time again. He is perturbed. “Tell me, who among us sides with the king of Israel?”

 But one of his officers suggests a different answer, “It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber, in your private quarters.” So the king decides to take care of the problem by capturing the prophet. He learns that Elisha is at Dothan, which was a strategic outpost about twelve miles north of Israel’s capitol city Samaria. The king sends a large army, including horses and chariots. They surround the city by night. All is in readiness to capture the prophet the following morning.

 But once again the king’s plans are foiled. When Elisha’s servant sees the large army, he is frightened and doesn’t know what to do. But Elisha, the Man of God, is not worried. “Don’t be afraid,” he says. “There are more with us than with them.” Then he prays that his servant’s eyes are opened to see the fiery chariots and horses protecting Elisha. Elisha prays again, “Strike this people, please, with blindness.” So the eyes of the Arameans are blinded, or bedazzled. They cannot recognize the prophet. He tells them, “This is not the way; this is not the city. Follow me and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.”

 Doesn’t this sound like a Shakespearean comedy? The army follows Elisha and he leads them into the capitol city itself. Once they are inside Samaria, Elisha prays again. “O Lord, open the eyes of these men so that they may see.” Their eyes are opened and they find themselves within the walls of their enemy. They are captured!

 The king of Israel is elated. “Father,’ he exclaims to Elisha, “shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?” I can picture him jumping up and down with excitement. After all, this is what political forces like to do to enemies. They exterminate them. But Elisha says “No.” “Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them return to their master.” The king obeys Elisha, and the Arameans no longer come raiding into Israel.

 Whether or not this is political satire, a morality play, or a factual account of a miraculous event, I love this story. I believe it tells us important things about ourselves and about God. First, the story speaks about politics and power. Both kings have political power. They can command armies. They make decisions. They tell others what to do. But the story shows that even kings, even those in authority, are powerless when compared to God’s authority and power. The story affirms that Yahweh is mightier than the political powers that control the lives of a nation’s people. It makes a mockery of the warring ways of nation against nation. The story encourages us to obey God, even when that is in opposition to the powers that be.

 A second theme in the story has to do with seeing and not seeing. It is not difficult to see the troubles in our world, as Elisha’s servant did. We can see and hear about violence detailed in our evening news. We worry about climate change. We know that homelessness and gang activity and drug abuse exist in our community. We deal with illness and economic issues. We worry about our borders and live among a diverse population. We know nations are at war, and fear another world war. We know division and disagreement exists, even in our own families. All of that we can see.

 But this story reminds us that God is at work even among the troubles that we see. This story invites us to pray that our eyes are opened to see what God is doing. God is not absent or uninvolved. This story offers hope that there is more than the trouble that we see. God is present, even in the midst of our troubles.

 I wonder where we find ourselves in this story. Do we identify with the king of Aram or the king of Israel? In what ways do we exercise power and privilege? Do we seek our own priorities at the expense of others. Or do we identify with the Aramean army, sent out on a task that seems too difficult, too big for us, too challenging, a task that meets us with unexpected obstacles? Perhaps we identify with Elisha’s servant, seeing only the problem, living with fear? Can we recognize that God is greater than our fear? Can we identify with Elisha, the “Man of God,” who both listens to God and shares God’s message, who is obedient and sees what others cannot. Perhaps there are times in our lives when we can identify with each of these characters. We need the hope that God is also present with us.

 I think the most important question is this, “Where do we find God in the story?” What is God doing in this story? I love this story because I find God working as a peacemaker, unraveling a cycle of violence, and bringing it to an end. God doesn’t end violence by using more violence, but by preparing a feast and offering hospitality. I am reminded of Psalm 23, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.” The table is not just for me, but also for my enemies. We eat together at this feast.

 Henri Nouwen speaks of hospitality as “the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.”

 This story of Elisha and the Aramean soldiers reminds us that God’s love does not have borders; it is available for all peoples. In this story God did not show favor to either king or their political desires, but worked among them to bring about peace between them. God is the peacemaker, the reconciler, the host who welcomes both sides to the table. Is that not also what Jesus has done, in his life, death and resurrection, inviting all of us to the table? Did he not also break bread with Judas, who betrayed him, and Peter, who denied him, and others who ran away and deserted him?

 The Biblical story invites us to enter into God’s hospitality, welcoming and sharing with our neighbors, even our neighbors who treat us as enemies. Menno Simons offers us an example. In 1545 he was expelled from East Friesland by the Empress Anna on the recommendation of a Reformed leader named John Lasco. Lasco considered Menno to be a heretic. Menno settled in the Lutheran city of Wismar. During the winter of 1545, a ship froze in the city’s harbor. On board were refugees; they were members of Lasco’s Lutheran congregation who had been exiled themselves. Although the city itself refused to help the refugees, members of Menno Simon’s congregation welcomed the exiles into their homes, providing for their needs, offering them a refuge. As they shared their homes with the exiled Lutherans, they conversed together, discussing their religious beliefs and differences. This was not without risk, and indeed, a list of the Mennonites was published by Reformed members who sought to win favor in the region. The Mennonites were expelled.

 Offering hospitality is not without risk. Jesus called it “carrying a cross” and in carrying his own cross, showed how very much God loves the world. Offering hospitality is cross-bearing, because it reaches across differences and welcomes the other, sometimes at great cost to one’s own self-interest and life. In the story of Elisha and the soldiers, Yahweh shows herself as a peacemaker, a hostess who sets a feast for her enemies, offering hospitality instead of hostility.

 Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” May we truly act as children of God. May our eyes be open to what God is doing in our world, and may we participate as peacemakers, children of God who carry the mark of our Creator.