

IF WHAT YOU FEAR DOES NOT EXIST

Text on Sunday, September 8, 2013

2 Kings 6:24—7:21

O my God, Such an appalling story is this. The beloved city, Israel's capital, is besieged by Syria. Famine—man-made, war-made—has them by the throat. No crops come from the fields for no one dares venture outside the city walls. No one is free. Everyone is terrified. Carrion and pigeon poop are sold for food at extortionate prices. The moral life of the people has collapsed in greed, violence, and betrayal. Are your ears still burning with the complaint of the mother who went to her neighbor's house expecting boiled boy for lunch, but was deceived? Despair over his city has shrunk the king to an inner tornado of angry, hopeless watching—like the useless officials in New Orleans after Katrina. Why should the ruler trouble to punish these women, or anyone, for their evil deeds when the whole fabric of society is rotting, starting with the leaders' failure to find peace with Syria. Why, the sentence that immediately precedes this awesome story is, "And the Syrians no longer came raiding into the land of Israel." But here they are again—and are we not responsible for this utter human disrepair?

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

(WB Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 1919)

The king of Israel now aims his impotent fury at God, or at the man of God, Elisha. He wants to kill somebody. We have been in a like place before.

This story is a parable of our self. We are the walled city. We are its violent, deceitful citizens. We are the raging ruler, who when the need is greatest, leans only to his own understanding, and has no God, though he goes to church each Sabbath day.

We are that city. Do we not have a wall, a shell, hiding us from our enemy? Haven't you a hard edge which those near you know too well, a limit beyond which you cut them off—"I don't want to talk about it"? Do you sometimes crawl into your shell saying, "I can't help it if . . ." then insert some trait or habit that is always messing things up, but for which you refuse to take responsibility, for you feel hopeless to change.

We are those mothers, shouting up at the king on the parapet of our city in decay, where the children are on the menu. Some might say we are stretching this story too far, but from what well but this did Jesus draw, saying that murder starts in your heart, and if you so much as call someone "Fool!"

under your breath, it's the same as murder, and brings the fires of hell? These stories are Jesus' stories. They, like him, are out to outrage our imagination for God, and thus bring us to the sober insight that we are not different from criminals. Our motives are alike. We have all let our inner city be ruled by fear, reacting like machines, as if we were slaves to evil masters. Of course, like good children, we have mostly colored inside the lines of "the law"—but the law of God we have outraged. How bitterly we complain about others. We tell it about that we are victims of this mean person or of that terrible situation brought on by so-and-so's lousy decisions. We whine "You make me feel . . ." and actually believe it, that our feelings are not our own charge. We are cannibals. We have ruined the habitat of our earth for all generations, and refuse to change any of our laws or behaviors to lighten the coming damage. Indeed, we have plotted to consume the children, east side, west side, all around the world.

Oh, the city is us, and the mothers are us, and we are the king, on whom the need for action has descended like a swarm of locusts. But our inner king can do no good. Our inner king does not believe in anything except what is in his mind. He leans only to his own understanding. He alone is the realist, who sees the whole picture, he tells himself. Possibility-talk is for girls. Budgets and war are for real men. But when we consider our king from Elisha's point of view, never mind that he goes to church, he seems an impotent, self-deluded disbeliever in everything except his own wisdom.

Stories from the Elisha cycle have brought us to a space like this before. We come to a still point of silent witness over the city of our self and the awesome, ruthless, heedless force we use to get what we want when we are afraid. This is the first step toward the hidden treasure of becoming a human. See, and do not deny and do not crawl with guilt. We are all like this. See it.

The Word of God comes to you now, to your inner king. *Things are bad, but it will not be so forever. Real food is available, tomorrow at about this time, says Elisha, for the right price.* The right price means that real human relations—love and justice—are going to be possible again. The captain of your guard—your cynical inner secretary of state—bleats out, *Nah! That can't work! Only violence works.* This vice-regent is also you, always on guard against genuine hope for change, and for freedom. Give no more attention to this Rambo of emotional reaction. You have soul friends. Who are they?

They are the lepers outside the city wall. These are the ones who can really see what is, and not deny. Sure, the lepers have probably spent days in the violence of anger at the city who turned them out, or dreamed in despair of healing and help. But now they come to themselves. Notice. There is not one leper, but four. The number is a sign for you. We come to

our self not alone, but in a community of dialogue where we learn to risk action, and sometimes make mistakes, all the while reflecting together on what we are learning. This is accountable discipleship. Adults who do not gather to reflect on their inner development cannot be a living church able to help fearful creatures transform into real human beings. Where there is no regular pattern of transformative dialogue among the members, such as these lepers are having, a church is just a playhouse.

What do they see, who find themselves outside the walled city of fear? The lepers see what no one else sees. They see that they are not well and that the whole society is not well, and that all are bound for death. *If we sit here and do nothing, we will die. If we retreat to our old ways behind the wall of fear and protection, we will die. That is sure. But if we go over into the camp of the enemy, who knows? Perhaps they will kill us, but we are as good as dead, so what? Perhaps they will not destroy us. We do not know. What if what we fear does not exist? We must go. Now.* Though they did not cause their mess, only the lepers take responsibility for the mess.

"They arose at twilight," says the story, to go to the enemy's camp. At the end of the day of seeing without denying, and before the night of sleep and delay, you too can rise, in spite of your fears, and act freely. As in all the Elisha stories, only the people with least power—the slaves, the servants, the women, the lepers—still have access to the heart of wisdom and courage. Only they have "learner's mind." Only they are free. God only saves through them. The captains of the guard, the finance men, the king—they never know what to do; they always choose wrong because they cannot get outside their walls to see that they are in bondage to fear. In the human world, their ability to weigh fears and threats gives them authority and power. and they stand at the pinnacle of human systems. But God sends stories like this one down through the ages to open our eyes to see, in the words of the apostle Paul, that "power is made perfect in weakness." Only in weakness are we free to question how to act if what we fear does not exist.

The lepers enter the enemy camp. Syria has fled—because they feared for a sound that did not exist. The lepers are the first to learn that all Israel has been in bondage to fears of things that did not exist. What drove the price of dove's dung through the roof . . . did not exist. What drove the mothers to murderous madness . . . did not exist. What sent the king in search of gallows for God's man . . . did not exist. The weapons of mass destruction . . . did not exist. According to the story, it was not Elisha who made this miracle. It says only that the man of God knew that the ruinous grip of fear would be released, and that love and justice would be possible tomorrow. What brings freedom to possibility lies with the lepers, the

learners! Only they can see the situation as it is, and act. Do you rule from fear, and never let go? Or do you yearn to learn?

Why is it that the lepers are free, and no one else? For a moment in the enemy camp, they do fall prey to fear and start hoarding. Still, they are able to come quickly free from their fears, and say, “What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news! Let us go and tell the king!” What is the key to this inner freedom to act in the possibility that what you fear does not exist?

Perhaps a Christian need not struggle for the answer, like a student with a tough exam, for the key is there in the Cross, God’s only word to us through all the gospels. The Cross stands for this: What you fear does *not* exist. Jesus stands for this. He prayed not that his own will be done, but Thy will, O God, not mine. Jesus is the absolutely free human.

Here is the fundamental Christian catechism: What I fear of death, and what I fear of every lesser loss, at home, at church, at work or in the world, arises from my thoughts, my will, my feelings, my belief that my happiness must flow as I am used to its flowing. But all this, dear God, is not your world, but mine. My thoughts from the past and my fears of the future all chatter on, building up the walls of the city of fear where I am in control, and God’s new thing cannot come. My fears and my pleasures, and the imagination by which I feed them, keep the city of God from descending.

But by your Cross, O Lord, I can see what you have seen, that the possibility of the new comes through what I have feared most, exactly that. Now, with the aid of my soul friends, I see that You, O Lord, are with me. In the present moment, even in the presence of my enemies, what I fear does not exist. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me.* I am free; for what I fear does not exist now.

O, dear Riverside, you have been in thrall to fears, and for so long a time. In the Cross of Christ, come free and see in the present moment that what you fear does not exist. The violence of anger will move from your path and you, like the lepers, will become *angels*—messengers of good news to the city. For whenever a beggar tells where there is food, another beggar may finally come and eat. May we feel the power to act now, according to the possibility you give, O Lord, that what we fear does not exist.

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in the City of New York*