

IF WHAT YOU FEAR DOES NOT EXIST

Texts on Sunday, August 26, 2007

2 Kings 6: 24—7:17

These stories from the Elisha cycle overwhelm me with their energy. In spite of, or perhaps because of, their fabulous nature, they feel so real, so connected to things happening right now inside of you and inside of me. Here is the besieged city. Here is the starvation, the violence, the betrayal.

Here the blindness, here the leprosy. And here too, the possibility of change. We have given our summer series of sermons wholly to the Elisha cycle so that you might focus in on a single idea, week by week, the way the life energy focuses in an embryo in a womb, week by week, until new life is given birth from within. The single question is, *Who are you, and who must you become?* Your religion provides answers to that question—sinner, disciple, saved, and so on—but tragically, every religious answer that can actually be written down, like in the back of the book, is unable to help when you are most in need. You don't need to be right; you need to be good. These stories were saved for you and for me—for our souls—like maps to hidden treasure. Really undertaking the adventure, actually following the steps, is the only way to the treasure. The treasure is your humanity. Think about these things with me.

The beloved city, the capital, has been besieged by the enemy. No crops are coming in from the fields; no one is going out. No one is free. Carrion and dung are sold for food at extortionate prices. The moral life of the people has collapsed into greed, violence, and betrayal. Are your ears still burning with the angry account of the mother who went to her neighbor's house expecting boiled boy for lunch, but was fooled? Despair over his city has shrunk the king to an inner tornado of angry, helpless watching—like in New Orleans two years ago. Why should the king spend his strength punishing the evil deeds arising in ordinary women and men? The whole social fabric of society is rotten; nothing holds together. The king is obsessed with anger and aims it where he can—at God or at God's man. He wants to kill somebody. We have met this person before.

He is our self. So also is the beloved city besieged. It is you, it is me. Do we not have a wall surrounding and hiding our nature from our enemy? Haven't you a hard edge which those near you know too well, a limit beyond which you say, "I don't want to talk about it"? Haven't you a habit you protect with the phrase, "I can't help it if . . ." and then insert some trait of your nature which is messing things up, but for which you do not want to take responsibility, for you feel hopeless to change. Like spears thrown from the wall of the city, we say, "I can't help it if I'm . . ." or "You make me feel so . . ." Yes! We actually believe and say these lies, as if we were no more than machines running on programs.

Spears tossed, we turn from the city wall to our starving, confused inner city, where the children are on the menu. You think we are stretching this too far? From what well but one like this did Jesus draw when he said that if you so much as call your neighbor "Fool!" beneath your breath you will feel the fires of hell? Are we so very far from the mothers' appalling violence? True, our faces will never make the evening news attached to such grisly crimes on the crawl beneath. But serious religion never meant to help you up into the judgment seat or down into a snug moral bed. These stories—Jesus' stories—are out to outrage your imagination for God, thus to bring home a sober fact, that we are not different from criminals. They and we have let ourselves be ruled by our fears and instincts like slaves by their lords. Yes, we have colored our crimes inside the lines of man's law—but the law of God we have outraged. We have plotted to consume the children, if not our own, then our neighbors'. Are we not responsible for the ruin of children's lives, east side, west side, all around the town? Oh, the city is us, and we are its king, on whom the need of action has descended like a cloud. But our inner king can do no good.

Now, stories from the Elisha cycle have brought us to this pass before: we come to a still, unimpassioned witness over the city of our self, over the awesome, ruthless, heedless force we have used to get what we want when our fears and instincts were bruised. If you have ever fasted intentionally for more than a day, you remember the stillness of that watching from emptiness at the hour when you would have been busy with making or taking food. This watching spirit is something precious. But in society at large, no one talks about this; you cannot learn about it. Even in the churches, as we noted some weeks ago, the worry is to pump up your self-esteem, as if our gospel were, “I’m okay, you’re okay.” Bill Coffin used to say that *that* is not the message of Christian faith. The Christian message is, “I’m not okay and you’re not okay—but that’s okay.”

Still, we glide over our evil, supposing it does not merit that awesome word. Why are we so in need of the pretense that we are good and doing the best we can? Because we are starving inside, because there is no real food coming inside our walls, because we have no real freedom and are afraid. Which is to say, because our religion isn’t really working. When it does work, though, when our trust in God is as clear as eyes are after much weeping, then we can really see ourselves as we are with dispassion, no pretense, no guilty feelings forcing our eyes to the ground before our Lord, and no fantastic prayer promises that we will never do this or that again. Now, we see: our city, our self, our inner king, our violence, and our unhappy hungry fellow citizens—we see what is. This is the first step on the map to the hidden treasure of becoming a human. See, and do not deny.

Now the Word of God to you, the king of the city, is that although things are bad, it must not be so for ever. Real food is available, tomorrow, about this time, says the man of God. What you need will be had for the right price. That is: human relations—love and justice—are going to be possible. But the captain of your guard does not believe it. You know this one, your next-in-command, your cynical inner vice president, who bleats, *Nah! That can’t work! Only violence works.* He is you, too, isn’t he?—the part of you that thinks you must always be defended against genuine religious feeling, against serious hope for great change, and for real freedom? Do not give more attention to this Rambo of your emotions. You have real soul friends.

They are the lepers, outside the city wall. These are the ones who can really see what is, and not deny. They are you, too. Perhaps the lepers have spent the days angry at the city who thrust them out, dreaming in despair of healing and help. But now, today, they come to themselves. Here is something important on the map to the hidden treasure of your self: there is not one leper, but four. The number is a sign for how we come to ourself: not alone, but in a community, in conversation and in risking action, making mistakes together and reflecting together on what we are learning. Adults who do not gather to reflect on their spiritual work cannot be a church as it is meant to function, that is, toward the transformation of creatures into real human beings. The church where there is no conversations like these lepers are having is just a playhouse or a movie theater.

What do they see who stand outside the walls where one actually can see? The lepers—they are you, too—see that they are not well. They see that the whole city is not well, and that all are bound for death. If we sit here and do nothing, we die, and if we go back into the old ways of our old city, we die. All that is sure. But if we go over into the camp of our enemy, which is our fear, who knows? Perhaps our enemy will not destroy us. We cannot know. We must go. Now.

“So 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 or delay, you rise in spite of your fears and act. As in all the Elisha stories, only the little ones—the slaves, the servants, the lepers—have access to the inner heart of wisdom and action. The king, who is your proud ego, along with all his militant defenders, is full of action, but he and they have no eyes for their disease. They never know what to do. But now the lepers arrive in the enemy camp—and no one is there. All that they have feared does not exist. What

drove the price of dove's dung through the roof . . . does not exist. What drove mothers to madness . . . does not exist. What sent your king in search of gallows for God . . . does not exist. Elisha did not make this miracle happen, according to the story. It says only that the man of God, God's Word, 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! It is they who are able to see the grievous situation as it is, and to act. Are you in such a relationship with spiritual friends? This map to the treasure directs you hence forthwith. Go and study.

Now see what these leprous men do when they come to the edge of the camp: they go into a tent and eat and drink. This is what you and I must have: real food, together, taken for our soul, soon. The liberal church tradition of the last many decades has spread a great error by teaching that you must go and serve others in their hunger and need while failing to teach one thing about taking real spiritual food for yourself, so that you may be strengthened to see yourself as you are, and gain a taste for what you must become within yourself before you can serve a meal to those without.

How marvelous that the next act of the well-fed lepers is to hoard! Of course serious spiritual life in community does not fix you once and for all. Of course you will again sometimes be greedy and afraid and prone to violence. But now, if you are on the map, you have spiritual friends. So, as it says, "Then they said to one another, 'What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news!'" In that simple act of seeing, which was their spiritual practice worked out along the wall of the old city, they turn from their evil and their fears and their little selves to become *angels*—*evangels*, bearers of good news to the city, revealing that what they feared does not exist.

It is of course not our message that all dangers in this world are mere illusion. No, the gospel message—the Living Word to you—is that you cannot grasp your real treasure, which is your humanity, or do the good you are able to do in this world, apart from a practice in community of spiritual seeing and spiritual fasting through which your fears are transformed into food, and you take food for your soul as from the hand of God, to provision you before you go to serve the hungering world like an angel.

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