

THE ELISHA CYCLE
"THIS IS NOT THE WAY"

Texts on Sunday, August 12, 2007

2 Kings 6: 8-23; John 14: 4-6, 27

Have you ever heard such a tale of peace-making? What shall we make of it? A pacifist might use the story to argue that we can or should make love, not war, in just this way—treating our enemies with generosity and sending them home in peace. Someone might like to press the story into the service of dismantling the reviled American prison at Guantánamo Bay, for it seems that the majority of those held there without charges for the last several years are men of no particular violence who could be fed a good meal and sent home. Whatever the merits of such arguments, don't you feel that this extraordinary story of Elisha's gift of peace must not be boiled down to mere political instruction? A far, far higher view of peace is in the teller's heart — peace "not as the world gives peace," in the words of the gospel of John. Here is truly a gospel story, if by "gospel" we can mean telling of the infinite love of God moving relentlessly into the world to transform it. Here, Isaiah's peaceable kingdom is already brought home, for here, *the wolf does live with the lamb, the leopard does lie down with the kid . . . the lion eats straw like the ox and they do not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain.* "For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea," Isaiah prophesies. Had the oracle already come to pass, even a century before Isaiah spoke?

Those of us who have studied the Bible together are accustomed to ask not whether the story happened, but why they kept on telling it? What is the kernel of such wholeness and help here that generation would tell it to generation through hundreds of years before someone even thought to put it in a book? As to this morning's story, you have already felt the tingle of the answer, so far as a name can be put to it. It is peace. Just like you, the ancient story tellers were riveted by a tale of peace and love and wisdom that ran contrary to everything they were taught about their evil enemy to the east. That part of you that knows that piling up many truths—or troops—against your foes will never bring an end to war—that is the heart that sings this story from ancient times to this day.

But then a question: Are we at peace? Have we—especially we religious—anything to show for our heritage of oracles and dreams of peace, love, and wisdom, whether in the world out there, or in the world within? I don't think we can say one clear word about what religious culture, taken as a whole, has learned of peace. Think how church people fight and grump about one another, as if their scriptures and their Lord had nothing to say to them about living differently with and for one another. Consider the recent excitement about going to war against Iraq. Seen from the stage of national politics, it was a major religious production. To be sure, leaders of various Christian denominations, notably the Pope and the President's own pastor, counseled strongly against that war, but this nation fervently desired some taste of blood to help settle their terror and anger over 9/11. Afghanistan just wasn't a big enough meal for the emptiness in our peaceless belly. Religious values haven't a chance with religious people under those circumstances. Three quarters of the nation cheered as we slugged that nasty despot, that little tar baby sitting by the roadside . . . bomb.

Now everyone is sick of the war. A majority think it was a bad idea in the first place. Some in the peace movement take this as a sign of a great wisdom growing in the American people. I doubt that. The average American, religious or not, holds the average belief about war and peace, namely, that these power struggles are external to herself. The average person hardly remembers how eager he was for some proper violence in 2002 as leaders stoked the fears of the people. We are weary of war that doesn't work, sure—but the violence is still in us. The spiritual transformation into a people who see horses and chariots of *fire*, who see that there are more *with* us than there are against—this has not

happened. And it never will happen to a whole people all at once. That is one reason this story of Elisha must not be read as moral directions for a nation. It isn't a plank in a political platform. No, the great wisdom of the Bible tradition has held on to this story for those who have ears to hear. For those, like Elisha's attendant, who are ready to wake, to rise early and go out and see. For the peace that the Lord gives, not as the world gives, comes to a woman here or a man there, and then, sometimes, to a whole spiritual community who begin themselves to see within the horses and chariots that are *of fire*.

The basic assumption behind peace as the world thinks of peace is that peace is when the bad stuff stops happening to me and to those I care about. In other words, the lack of peace is the enemy's fault, whoever the enemy is. Sometimes, perhaps even often, the enemy is myself. In that case, aware of a pattern of my behavior that I hate, or that I would hate to have people know about, I stew in self-disgust because I cannot overcome myself. I am my own enemy, external to myself. I shout "Cut it out!" to myself, just like I used to yell at my fighting kids, but nothing really changes. Peace, as the world gives, would be to subdue these demons.

These assumptions about peace all depend on violence—violence toward the enemy out there, violence toward our own self. We are a tub of violent passions. Is it too much to wonder whether the violence that rains down as bombs or bullets on cities near and far is actually the result of millions and millions of souls chained in their hearts to the idea that their personal happiness—their peace—requires force applied to their enemies, to that nettlesome person who is barring the way, to that tiresome, tireless humiliating habit you have, to that anger or hurt from long ago which never goes away? Is this the real cause of war?

The Bible tells me: So! Yes, it is so. See. Elisha has three conversations in this story, in addition to his prayers to God: first and last with the king of Israel, second, with his own attendant, and third, with the army of the enemy. Each of these parties is consumed by a spirit of violence, albeit in different ways. The attendant is utterly afraid of his weakness. He is like you and me, facing our trials undermined by doubt, feeling faithless, but nevertheless a person much persuaded of the value of violence. The army of Syria, with horses and chariots arrayed around the house of Elisha fairly breathes with the sweat of arrogant power and its violence. That army is like us when we have caught our foe in pincers, with evidence and advocates behind us, and we are sure we can sweep what is bad from our path. As the story nears its conclusion, the king of Israel is no different from the Syrians. Here is a word for the wise: the king, who is like our own beloved self ruling at the center of our lives, is no different from our hated enemies—he is a slave of violent hopes, eager and astounded at the good fortune to have at last the enemy in his grasp. He can hardly restrain himself. "Father, can I kill them, can I kill them?" How like us in our terrified belief that the peace we want is . . . just there, if we could but destroy the bad things we hate.

Elisha is the voice—the word of God—that awakens a possibility for peace, not as the world gives, in those who have ears to hear. For the attendant who is willing to wake and rise early in the morning, for the disciple who sees the awful situation of human violence, Elisha prays "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." For the arrogant and over-confident army, Elisha prays "Strike this people with blindness, please" and shouts to them, "This is not the way. This is not the city." For the king, who stands for our deep and precious preference for our self and our way—Elisha simply challenges him. "Did you capture the enemy? Are they 'yours'? Of course not. Feed them and be at peace."

In each conversation, the word of God through Elisha really turns the event. The spirit of violence in each ear shifts. What do they hear? What can you hear, in order to receive peace, yet not as the world gives? This is what you can hear, if you have ears to hear: *Things are not just what you think, though they are also just what you think. You really are surrounded by forces that will take you down,*

but there are more who are for you than who are against you. Can you kill what you hate, can you kill, can you kill? Yes, you can. You really do have the power to destroy some things you hate, but this is not the way. It will do you no good. For your God is calling you to discover being not afraid in the midst of your fears; to love your enemies and feed them and send them home to their master.

I am the way, says the Lord. You will get nowhere along this other way, where you are fighting your enemies within and your enemies without. The truest action you can offer—the way, the truth, and the life—is to become like the attendant: attentive. Step back from your self and your situation; see your fears and your fraught hopes and your old habits as the servant of Elisha saw the army of the Syrians surrounding your house. Feel the poison of your unmeasured passions. Do not criticize. Do not fall abjectly before your Lord with self-hatred. Just rise early and see. And then step back, step back, that God's word may open your inner eye to see also horses and chariots—of fire! Of spirit! Not as the world gives do I give peace. See also that there are more who are for you than are against you. See that it is also this way eternally. In that moment, when the prayer of the man of God is granted you, and your eyes are open, you know the way. The world is waiting for you to see.

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