**First Presbyterian Church**

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**“Being Different”**

**A sermon by Jennifer Copeland**

**17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)**

**July 28, 2019**

II Kings 6:8-23

Who would pass up the chance to preach on this marvelous little story in Second Kings? This is the stuff of campfire story lore or bedtime storytelling. Tell us the story about Elisha and the army he captured from Aram. Elisha, heir to the mantel and double portion of Elijah; Elisha, healer of leapers like Naaman and resuscitator of dead children, like the son of the widow from Naan. Just prior to this story in II Kings, Elisha made a sunken axe head float to the surface of the river. Tell us a story about Elisha. I think I will.

Once upon a time, Aram, not to be confused with Iran, was at war with Israel, not to be confused with America. For today’s story, we learn that every time the Aram king plans an attack, the Israel king manages to find out—“more than once or twice.” Clearly, it’s not an accident; there is someone who knows what the Aram king is planning and that someone is Elisha.

Every time Aram king plans an attack, Elisha tips off Israel king, who moves his own soldiers into place and handles it. Aram king thinks he has a traitor in his midst, but it’s even better than that. Elisha is sitting in the comfort of his own tent. Without ever setting foot in the territory of Aram, he knows exactly what Aram king is about to do. Maybe a little ESP? Or just a fortune teller?

Aram king is understandably outraged. “Go find out where he is and I will seize him.” And they go with a mighty force in the dark of night to surround little Dothan where Elisha has pitched his tent. Such a bluster, such a show of force, it’s like launching the most powerful non-nuclear warhead in the world against a tiny mountain in Afghanistan. Who does that?

Needless to say, the folks with Elisha are overwhelmed. Game over; they’ll crush us. Nice knowing you. Now, we’re all going to die. Good job letting us get trapped here.

But like Elisha can see where Aram king plans to send his army, Elisha can see there are greater forces at work in the world, the forces of the Lord. “. . . [P]lease open his eyes that he may see,” Elisha asks on behalf of his aid. Lo and behold, his aid’s eyes are opened and he sees who really has the upper hand—“the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

Now we’ll see who has the biggest non-nuclear warhead. I’m sure those gathered with Elisha were gleeful about the impending route, especially since they had thought just moments ago that things would go the other way. But all Elisha does with all this power is ask the Lord to make them blind. A blinding light, not a bomb.

Aram and Israel have been at it for awhile. We don’t know who the kings are in this story—the names have been intentionally omitted because the story is not about them. The story is about all the rulers and their people who get used to conflict. The story is about people who expect retaliation in the face of aggression. The story is about people who believe the one with the biggest stick will eventually beat us up. That sums up most rulers and their people during most periods of history. So, these kings can take on the names and faces of whoever fits the mold wherever the story is told.

It can be about leaders who use the playbook: if we get hit, we’ll hit back harder. We’ll show you who’s stronger.

It can be about leaders who don’t even wait to get hit first, who say: We’ll hit first to send the message to all who are watching that we will always be able to hit the hardest. We even have a name for that: preemptive strike.

This story is about people who are used to preemptive strikes and retaliation. It’s a story about people who are not used to creativity and imagination for navigating conflict. They can’t see the real force at work in the world because they are hostage to what confronts them in the immediate moment.

Elisha’s aid stepped out of his tent and saw them surrounded by enemy forces, so many horses and chariots that he was already speed dialing his family to say final goodbyes. “Alas, what shall we do?” You can hear the frustration and perhaps amusement in Elisha’s voice when he prays: “Oh Lord, please open his eyes.” Show him what’s really going on here. Show him that a preemptive strike doesn’t have to be our first move. Show him, we don’t even have to fight back.

Once the Aram army is blinded by the light, it’s pretty easy for Elisha to do whatever he wants to do with them. He could march them to the edge of a cliff and let them walk off. He could have pointed them toward home and told them to behave better next time. Instead, he takes them to Israel king. Of course, they have no sense of direction, being blind like they are, but they must know Elisha isn’t taking them home by a different road.

Imagine their resignation when they regain their sight only to see they’re deep in the heart of enemy territory, face to face with the opposition. Even if Aram king had any army left, he couldn’t rescue these folks before Israel king massacres them in place. They know the cavalry is not coming for them.

Israel king is licking his chops—or sharpening his sword—because he has no imagination either. He’s been plagued by these ambushes and skirmishes with Aram king for years. And now it’s his turn to send a message back. Something like:

* If you’re not with us, you’re against us.
* Overwhelming will mean obliteration.
* Or one of my favorites, It’s gonna be bad, really bad.

Elisha’s aid sees himself surrounded by the enemy and he expects to die. Elisha’s king sees himself surrounding his enemy and expects to kill them. How ordinary is that?

Can’t we think of something different than perpetuating the same old cycle of get hit and hit back harder? What happens when we’re not the strong ones anymore and we can’t hit harder than we were hit? Wouldn’t it make sense for the strong ones to be the ones that say, “We’re not going to hit you anymore. We’re certainly not going to hit you first, but even more so, we’re not going to hit you back. No more of this. No more of this.”

Now you think I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. The followers of Jesus have known where Jesus stands on violence since that night in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said, “No more of this.” And if they thought he was a dreamer, those doubts were put to rest when Mary came back to the house Sunday morning and announced: “I have seen the Lord.”

Even if they’d spent the past 2 days wishing they had fought that losing battle, lamenting their dishonor at running away, saying to themselves, “We could have done more,” Mary’s Sunday morning news coupled with the experiences they would have for the next 50 days, tell a different story. They tell a story of God’s imagination. Imagine if the followers of Jesus had missed the chance to tell that story because they had decided to fight back and wound up fertilizing the ground in Gethsemane with their blood.

They didn’t fight back because they were afraid, not because they had any imagination. If they’d had enough swords hidden under those cloaks and knew more about fighting than fishing, they probably would have gone down in a blaze of glory. They would have been quickly forgotten by history, because there are so many stories of people with no imagination who only know how to fight and kill and get killed in the process. Everybody can’t be Braveheart. Most of the others end up in unmarked graves.

Lucky for those followers that night, they didn’t have the numbers to fight back and they weren’t brave, so they ran away. Chances are, if they’d stayed, no one would have arrested them anyway. They weren’t important.

But the one who was important, the one who had the upper hand, didn’t fight back either. That’s the real story. Even when we know we will win, the message is, “No more of this.”

Here is Elisha standing before Israel king with Aram king’s Revolutionary Guard. Get rid of these folks and you’ve cut out the heart of the opposition. Sure, there may be some renegades out there, some resistance forces that will always flit about like gnats, but there won’t be any real opposition. Taking out this group will send a message that echoes beyond the halls of power in Aram. Everybody will know—We are great again.

Clearly, that is Israel king’s plan, but refreshingly, this nation state doesn’t appear to have an imperial ruler. Elisha has the last word. The one who can only imagine violence heaped on violence as the solution to his problems doesn’t get to solve the problem. The solution comes from Elisha, who matter-of-factly reminds Israel king: I brought them here, not you.

Elisha tells the king, bring them food and water. With the gift of food and water, their status changes from hostage to guest. There are strict rules in Israel about how to treat guests, travelers, sojourners, foreigners, immigrants, refugees—strict rules starting with the imperative: Give them something to eat.

Do you see what just happened here? So called hostile forces surrounded a little knoll in the borderlands of Israel. Without lifting a hand Elisha delivers them to the country’s leader and then invokes Article One of the Holiness Code—welcome the stranger for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt. These hostile forces just went from being a threat to being a guest.

That takes some imagination. But if we only know one definition of power, then we can only offer one response. We need to use our imagination. We need more creative definitions of power.

We need these creative definitions not just in the face of the obvious: trade wars with China or drone duels with Iran. Lord knows, we need it in those places. But what about our places, what about the places where we live and move and have our being.

Every day we wield some kind of power and we absorb some other kinds of power.

* Where we throw our trash and what we throw in the trash is an exercise of power.
* What we set our thermostat on is an exercise of power.
* Who we choose to send to jail or bail out is an exercise of power.
* How we spend our money is an exercise of power.
* When we fight back or declare, no more of this, is an exercise of power.

In addition to that pithy phrase Jesus offered us in the Garden when they came out with swords and clubs to arrest him, he also said on another occasion, “the one to whom much is given, much will be required.”

Elisha had it all. He had the enemy in the palm of his hand and he delivered this enemy to the nation’s ruler. That’s quite a lot to be given. And with all that power, Elisha transformed his enemy into his guests. And then he sent them home.

Those with no imagination might expect them go home and redouble their efforts, plan a new attack that won’t fail this time. But the story tells us, “they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.” In other words: They lived happily ever after.

And that’s no fairy tale. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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