

The God of Angel Armies

2 Kings 6:8-23

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

August 27, 2023/Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

We are drawing close to the end of our summer series on “Seeking Peace Together.” Next Sunday, Anna Braun, chaplain at the jail, will be here so we’ll take a one-week pause. Then we’ll wrap things up on September 10.

Way back on July 16, I said that I was going to be spending most of the summer in the Old Testament, looking at stories that we don’t often hear in church, stories that I think are unusual and interesting and open up all kinds of questions about how we might become more peaceable people.

There are much more obvious texts in the bible that we could have looked at when it comes to the theme of peace. The worship resources, which were exhaustive and had enough material for thirteen Sundays, included many of the obvious candidates.

I chose to go with OT texts this summer for a few reasons:

- I like a challenge! I hadn’t preached on many of these passages before, and it was good to be forced into some new biblical terrain.
- Most of us are pretty unfamiliar with the Old Testament.
- I think Mennonites as the “peace people” can just default to the Gospels and the same peace texts over and over again and fail to wrestle with the unruliness and complexity of Scripture in its entirety.

I have enjoyed our summer tour through a few parts of the OT. I hope you have, too. If not, I’m sure we’ll return to the NT in September.

Today’s story definitely falls into the category of “unusual and interesting.”

We’re fast forwarding a bit from last week. David has died, as has his famous son Solomon. Israel is descending into a period of mostly bad kings and the fracturing of the kingdom that peaked with David and Solomon.

In this context, we have the prophet, Elisha. What can we say about Elisha?

Well, he was apparently bald, so I immediately feel a connection. 2 Kings 2 has surely one of the weirdest stories in all the bible. A bunch of young men tease Elisha by calling him “baldhead.” He quite naturally responds by cursing them in the name of the Lord, after which two bears come out of the forest and maul them.

Strangely, this text was not among the options in our worship resources on seeking peace together. 😊

At any rate, Elisha’s resume thankfully includes a bit more than just the incident with the bears.

He miraculously provides oil to a starving woman whose sons are about to be taken as slaves (2 Kings 4:1-7). He raises another woman’s son from the dead (1 Kings 4:8-37).

He miraculously feeds one hundred men from a mere twenty loaves of barley (1 Kings 4:42-44), which obviously foreshadows another feeding of a larger crowd by a mightier prophet.

(Indeed, some commentators say that Matthew’s gospel quite obviously emphasizes these links between Elisha and Jesus.)

Speaking of links to Jesus, Elisha also famously heals the military commander Naaman, who served the king of Aram, Israel’s traditional enemy (although sometimes Aram is portrayed as doing God’s work in judging Israel’s faithless kings).

All of this leads up to the text we’ve heard this morning.

Israel is in trouble. Israel and Aram are at war and the Aramean army is advancing. The Aramean king is plotting his military strategy.

But somehow, the king of Israel keeps hearing of their plans. The prophet Elisha is warning him (how he knows is not made clear; I think we can safely assume that there is something supernatural going on).

Word comes to the Aramean king about what is going on. He's understandably not happy and decides it's time to deal with this irritating spoke in his military wheel. He demands to know where Elisha is.

Upon learning of Elisha's whereabouts, he sends his army to deal with him.

The king's army surrounds the city of Dothan where Elisha is, and Elisha's servant is dismayed. Hope is surely lost.

And here's where the story gets a bit weird (or weirder). Elisha prays for the Aramean army to be blinded. And God makes it so.

Elisha then leads the army to Samaria. But instead of allowing the king of Israel to kill his enemies, Elisha orders that they be given food and drink and sent home to their master.

And so, "the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory." (2 Kings 6:23).

Peace is achieved. At least for a while (Aram and Israel will resume hostilities almost immediately after this passage in 2 Kings).

So, what do we do with *this* story. Is this a kind of blank cheque for us to pray misfortune upon our enemies?

(We laugh, but perhaps too quickly. Recall last Sunday's sermon about leaving vengeance and justice to the Lord, and possibly even asking God to take revenge upon all that is ugly and wicked in our world!)

But, no, that's not I want to focus on. I want to focus again on three lessons we might take from this odd passage. I'll spend less time on the first two than on the third.

Let's start with peace. Makes sense in a summer series on peacemaking, right?

This is certainly a story that almost comedically pokes at the futility of military strategizing, and of God's role in pursuing alternatives to violence.

Like in the story of Abigail and David last week, we see that a disruptive interruption in the predictable cycle of violence in response to violence can have surprising results.

In this case, the Aramean army is struck blind, led off to another location, given lunch and then set free. Likely not what they had in mind as they descended upon Elijah's camp.

Why blindness? Why not just miraculously make all the weapons disappear or send some kind of virus into the Aramean camp?

Well, it's impossible to say with any certainty, but I wonder if there is a metaphor at work here. Perhaps the text is saying that war and that attitudes and impulses that feed it are a form of blindness, of seeing but not really seeing (a phrase the bible uses a lot), of being unwilling to consider other possibilities.

At any rate, this image of a blind army being led around by an eccentric prophet is likely meant to be both comedic and convicting. It is an image of nations and kingdoms busily plotting the ruin of their enemies while ignoring the will of God.

Second, I think stories like this reveal something important about the nature of Scripture.

Simply put, it shows that Scripture is in dialogue with itself.

The following thought may have occurred to you this summer. Well, yeah, ok, there are a few nice stories about peace in the OT, but they come in the broader context of all kinds of violence! Aren't we just kind of cherry picking a bit?

And the answer would be: Yes, we are.

I've already poked fun at the story of bald Elisha and the bears. But seriously, how does the reactive violence of that story square with our text this morning?

Or how do we make sense of the story of Saul losing his kingship because he was not thorough enough in his extermination of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15).

Or, as I've said, later in 2 Kings where it seems like Aram and Israel are back at war with God apparently backing the Israelites.

Which is it? How can God command (or allow) violence in one story and thwart it another?

Inconvenient as we may find it, the Bible contains stories that question and subvert other stories.

The book of Ezra argues for strict Jewish ethnic purity, with the prophet going as far as to send away all the Moabite women and children that the Israelite men had intermarried with. The book of Ruth portrays a Moabite woman becoming part of the community of Israel and the lineage of Jesus.

The book of Proverbs says, over and over, that the righteous will be blessed and prosper. The book of Job shows the devastating suffering of a righteous man (and, well, there's always the story of Jesus!).

Leviticus demands sacrifices. The prophet Amos says sacrifices without justice are a stench in the Lord's nostrils.

The list could go on.

Too often, I think Christians—maybe particularly *Protestant* Christians feel like it's their task to defend the Bible as some kind of perfect book that always speaks in precisely the same way about the same issues.

It isn't. This doesn't mean it's not inspired or sacred or anything like that. It simply means that Scripture is a library of texts that portray the truth of God in dialogue with human struggle and engagement over long periods of time.

Yes, the NT changes things, in many ways, particularly when it comes to the question of violence.

Jesus is the lens through which we interpret all of Scripture, and Jesus consistently refuses violence and commands his followers to do the same. As Christians, we unapologetically cherry pick and prioritize the teachings of Jesus and interpret everything else in the Bible through him.

But even the NT is in conversation with itself. In parts of the Gospels, Jesus seems to tie salvation to what we do. In response to the question, "What must I do to inherit

eternal life?”, for example, Jesus responds not with a list of things to believe, but with a command to love one’s neighbours.

In the Epistles, Paul talks much more about salvation as a gift of God, given by grace to those who believe.

Scripture is a gift, but it is also a challenge. And part of the task of the church is to wrestle with it together.

But I want to spend the remaining time on what I hope is a more personally relevant theme of this passage.

About ten years ago, popular Christian musician and worship leader Chris Tomlin released a song called “Whom Shall I Fear (God of Angel Armies)? I don’t have time to play it, but you can google it this afternoon if you’re so inclined.

The song’s title and theme is almost certainly drawn from our passage in 2 Kings today. Here’s the chorus:

I know who goes before me
I know who stands behind
The God of angel armies
Is always by my side
The one who reigns forever
He is a friend of mine
The God of angel armies
Is always by my side.

It calls to mind a portion of our text this morning. 2 Kings 6:15-17:

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked.

¹⁶ “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

¹⁷ And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Now, I have sort of mixed feelings about the song itself. A lot of popular Christian worship music is accused of being a little thin or speculative theologically and unimaginative musically, and I get this critique.

And yet. There’s a reason that this is song was and is so popular.

Who among us hasn’t had the experience of, like Elisha’s servant, looking out at the world and thinking, “this looks pretty bad... I don’t know what we’re going to do... We need help from the outside!”

Who among us doesn’t know what it’s like to be afraid in the face of what looks like insurmountable obstacles?

Maybe it’s the state of the world, anxiety over the all the fires and flooding, and the fire hydrant of bad news in our media.

(Side note: I think our current media climate has massive incentives to dwell on bad news instead of good news. Fear and anger are very profitable. But that’s another story. The anxiety that is produced is real.)

Maybe it’s political instability, worries about a world where the extremes seem to dominate the conversation.

Maybe it’s deteriorating health. Few things more naturally make us afraid than losing capacities we once took for granted. Few things more naturally call forth fear than our approaching deaths.

Maybe it’s a relationship that we just can’t seem to get right. Maybe it’s watching someone we love blunder down destructive paths.

Maybe it’s struggling with addictions or compulsions or besetting sins that we know are bad for us but that we just don’t seem strong enough to walk away from and leave behind.

I think we all know what it's like to be in a situation where we feel utterly helpless. And if we don't, we likely will. This is part of the human predicament.

And in this context, the idea of a God who fights for us is enormously comforting and compelling. The idea of an unseen realm where things are going on that we may only be dimly aware of can be a source of great strength and encouragement.

The words Elisha speaks to his terrified servant — “Do not be afraid” — words that echo throughout Scripture can speak into our hearts with new immediacy and hope.

And it brings us peace. Maybe not world peace, but inner peace.

“Open his eyes,” Elisha says. His servant is struggling to find any hope. *What are we going to do?!!* And he is granted a vision of the God of angel armies that is always by his side.

Now, does this mean that no hardship will befall us? That God will always orchestrate things to go well in our lives? That we all have a private angel army ready to engineer the outcomes we want if we can just summon the will to see or believe rightly enough?

No, of course not. We've already mentioned Job as the most obvious example of the fact that there are no formulas to avoiding suffering in our world.

There is also Jesus. Obviously.

There is another place in Scripture where angel armies are mentioned. Jesus is in Gethsemane. A large crowd has come to arrest him. One of his disciples has responded with violence, cutting off the servant of the high priest's ear. And then we read these words:

⁵² “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? (Mat. 26:52-53)

Jesus refuses the path of violence. He chooses the path of suffering for our salvation and for the salvation of the world.

He does this knowing that the God of angel armies is indeed at his side, too, trusting that God will ultimately deliver him.

What was true for Jesus is true for us. We are never alone. Never forsaken. Never abandoned. Never without hope, no matter how things might appear.

There is more going on in the world than we know, more than we can see.

The God of angel armies is always by our side.

Amen.

