

Transforming Initiatives

II Kings 6:8-23

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 15) 2018

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The King of Aram (or Syria) troubled the nation of Israel. That's what the old story says. What that means is Aram kept sending raiding parties into Israel stealing their crops and livestock, carrying off the young people of Israel making them into slaves in Syria, and all-around finding ways to wear down the king and kingdom of Israel so that Israel would eventually give in and either become a buffer state for Aram or at least pay a heavy ransom in order to keep Aram from dominating Israel.

But something interesting was happening. It seems that Israel had a spy in the inner counsels of the King of Aram. At least, this is what it seemed to the King of Aram. You see, every time he sent soldiers on a raid into Israel, somehow his secret plans found their way to Israel and the Israelites would either be gone when the Arameans arrived or would avoid wherever the Arameans were hiding in ambush. So the king of Aram called in his intelligence and counter-intelligence experts and said find the "mole" in my national security counsel. After much investigation, the experts returned with this report. "King," they said, "Somehow or another the Israelite prophet, Elisha, knows everything you say and do and is reporting everything to the king of Israel. The prophet Elisha is your man. Get him and you stop your national security leak."

So the king of Aram said, "Okay, get the special forces troops together and

get this guy. Move quickly and decisively; move during the night, surround his place and when he wakes up in the morning, we will have him.”

In the next scene, day is breaking outside the home of the prophet Elisha. The prophet’s assistant goes outside to get the newspaper and what he sees strikes terror in his heart! Outside, surrounding their house is a whole army of Arameans – chariots and warhorses, infantry, cavalry, bowmen, body armor and shields, swords, spears, bows and arrows, all gleaming in the morning sun. The assistant calls for the prophet, “Master, what shall we do?!”

Good ole Elisha looks around and says, “Don’t be afraid. For there are more with us than there are with them.” The assistant looks at him as if the old man is crazy. “You have to kidding, Elisha! We are surrounded by the Aramean army!”

Elisha smiles, then prays one of the great prayers of the Bible, a prayer that has echoed across the centuries for every person of God in despair, he prays, “Oh, Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.” When they opened their eyes from praying, they could not believe what was before them. Everywhere they looked, they saw the Aramean army, but outside the Aramean army was a wider, encircling army of angels “in a flame of zeal severe,” to use old Milton’s phrase (PR V, 807). Flaming chariots and horses and angels were everywhere on the surrounding mountains!

Take note every one of you who is overwhelmed. Every one of you who is helpless in the face of all your burdens hear this prayer and hear this story! There is more with us than with that which threatens to overwhelm us. Open our eyes so

might see the power of the living God!

This is an apocalyptic prayer resulting in apocalyptic vision. “Apocalypse,” meaning, “unveiling” or “revealing” does not mean seeing something exotic or weird. It means seeing what’s really there. Elisha’s prayer results in his assistant seeing the truth, seeing reality. Our calling is to pray this prayer so we too, are able to see what’s truly going on in the world around us instead of the hype, the fake news, the spin, the illusion steadily fed to us by the powers.

This is a classic example of what we call “white blindness.” Our “white privilege” results in “white blindness” so that we can only see the Aramean army, see only the so-called “standard” power structures. We can only see the “Aramean way” because we benefit from the Arameans, think like Arameans, and imagine like Arameans. But those of us who are black have a long legacy of knowing how to pray, “Open our eyes that we may see,” so that we can see the power of the living God. We white assistants to the black prophet must listen to the prophet. “Oh, God, open our eyes that we may see.”

The ignorant Arameans started coming toward Elisha and so the prophet prayed, “Close their eyes so they cannot see.” And the whole army of Aram is struck blind. The army is wandering around, stumbling over each other and Elisha yells, “You are in the wrong place. Follow me and I will take you to the one for whom you are looking.” So this massive army, struck blind and now powerless, meek and submissive follow Elisha.

And Elisha leads them straight to the capital city and to the king of Israel.

He leads the blind army straight to the palace. The king of Israel also cannot believe his eyes. At first, he is scared and then when he discovers that the enemy troops are helpless, he cannot believe his good fortune. He calls out his own troops, who quickly take positions around the blind enemies. With excitement that he cannot contain, he says to the prophet, “Can I kill them? Can I kill them? Oh, prophet, let me kill them. Please! Can I? Can I?”

But old Elisha has something else in mind. He prays again, “Open their eyes so they may see.” And immediately the Aramean army is able to see again. Of course, they are frightened. What in the world has been happening to them? They thought they had easy duty; they were going down to capture one man and then they were struck blind and now they find themselves inside the walls of the Israelite capital city surrounded by Israelite soldiers.

Elisha proclaims loudly, “There will be no killing here today. Put away your arms and instead bring food and drink. Instead of battle, today we feast!” And the story says that they all had a great feast and everyone ate their fill. Then Elisha said to the Arameans, “Now return home to your families and to your king.” The story ends with these brief words, “And the Arameans no longer troubled the land of Israel.”

This is another one of those great Old Testament stories. This story is about the surprising ways God works in the midst of violence and conflict. Elisha did what my old teacher, Glen Stassen called, a “transforming initiative.” Stassen taught that the church is called to try something “different” in this violent world. We take the surprising initiative that helps transform situations of violence.

Especially in the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus in Matthew 5-6-7, Jesus calls us to do the surprising and creative thing that transforms confrontational situations by going the second mile, giving our cloak as well as our coat, and turning the other cheek. All are creative responses to domination and power, which transforms the situation so the perpetrator must respond in a new way.

It is not enough for us to declare that we are against violence; that we are against injustice. We ask for more specifics for our context. What do we do? What can we offer that is practical and transforming? How can we be involved?

In 1974, the Brazilian Archbishop, Dom Helder Camara talked about the “spiral of violence.” He said there is “Violence 1 – the actual relations of power, where there are some who are oppressed. In the realm of politics and society, some folk have lost their freedom or their human rights, they are without proper shelter or adequate food and clothing, or they experience racism. And though it masks itself as the status-quo, it is a daily violence that destroys, diminishes, and dehumanizes people all the same.

Violence 2 of the cycle or spiral is “rebellion and revolt.” Usually it is some sort of full-fledged violent revolution or rebellion or ongoing civil war. Other times it shows up as a kind of chronic low-level crime and violence. Whichever way, people get tired of being ground down into the dirt and rebel.

Then there is third level of violence – reaction. The forces of power react to violence with greater violence. Sometimes it is martial law or austerity programs or

increased police powers and putting more people in jail or even full-scale war. Or we decide to become a vigilante society where each and every person carries their own gun and becomes their own law.

Jesus came and unmasked the spiral violence and showed it for what it is. In turn, he was killed by the powers-that-be, in their effort to demonstrate that violence is the only way to get anything done. But God in Jesus Christ broke the cycle of violence by absorbing the violence on the cross, being resurrected, and responding with transforming new life instead of more violence.

We believe that the Holy Spirit leads us use the creative and imaginative power of God to take transforming initiatives in a variety of situations to help break the cycle of violence. This past week at our VBS our children and many of you began to learn some of the basics of what it means to be a peacemaker, a follower of Jesus.

Several of you have related recent experiences here in Nacogdoches of seeing a Hispanic family or perhaps a Muslim woman, being harassed and bullied by someone. We have provided these handy cards so we can begin to think ahead of time of how we might respond creatively when we witness such behavior. We hope to do more in the future. Probably do a study and training perhaps during the Sunday School hour beginning in the fall and perhaps more, a community-wide training.

Michelle Tooley, who used to be a member here several years ago while she was the Assoc. Director of the Baptist Student Ministry at SFA. Michelle passed

away from cancer a couple of years ago but before that she taught at Belmont College in Nashville. I knew her in seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and later through the Baptist Peace Fellowship of N. America. Michelle was very active with Witness for Peace. WFP is a Christian organization that goes into the places of violence and literally stands in the way of the bullets to take care of the non-combatants. I remember Michelle telling about a time she was in a village in Central America where rebels were on one side and government troops were on the other and in between were children, women, elderly, and members of the village caught in the crossfire. WFP went into the village to care for those caught in the cycle of violence. Michelle talked about the bullets whizzing past them and mortar rounds exploding as she cared for the suffering and the wounded and dying.

You might think to yourself, “That’s admirable but I’m never going to be involved in anything like that.” Well, I doubt back when Michelle was a member of Austin Heights she thought she would ever do anything like that, either. But she did, all because she responded to the call of God. Because she saw something of God working in this world that not everyone else saw. But it also raises the question of how you might be involved in peacemaking here in Nacogdoches.

There is a poignant scene in the classic 1971 movie *The Last Picture Show*, starring young Jeff Bridges, Timothy Bottoms, and young Cybill Shepherd. Crusty old Ben Johnson and Cloris Leachman won Academy Awards for their supporting roles in the movie. Larry McMurtry wrote the novel and it is set in a small dying West Texas town in the mid-1950’s. In this particular scene Sam, played by Ben Johnson is standing outside his pool hall/café, and down from his movie theater. It is late at night and a carload of teenaged boys drive up and get out. The youngest

of the group, Billy, jumps out and runs inside with a bloody nose. Billy is a special needs kid, though we don't know why, and it is obvious he is ashamed as he runs past Sam into the café/pool hall.

Sam looks at the other boys and says, "Which one of you bloodied his nose?" Someone speaks up, joking and explains that the town prostitute bloodied Billy's nose. The boys thought it would be fun to get the town prostitute with Billy.

Sam is angry. He says, "You boys can get on out of here. I don't want to have anymore to do with you. Scaring a poor, unfortunate creature like Billy just so you could have a few laughs. I've been around that trashy behavior all my life. I'm getting tired of putting up with it. You can stay out of this pool hall, my café, and my picture show, too. I don't want no more of your bidness."

One of the boys, Sonny, gulps and says, "We didn't mean for anything bad to happen, Sam."

Sam says, "You didn't even have the decency to wash his face."

We live in a time where trashy behavior has become national policy and high fashion, and maybe even our national character, in everything from making fun of others, to outright bigotry and exploitation and violence. We can call it whatever we want but it's still trashy behavior.

The call of God is not to put up with it. But we have to learn to respond with creativity just as much as courage, imagination as well guts, and – oh, this is

difficult – with love along with justice.

No easy task. But no one said being a follower of Jesus was supposed to be easy.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.