

Sunday August 9th, 2020

2 Kings 7

“Who is in Control During This Pandemic?”

Well, good morning! It has been a while hasn't it? It has been a while since we could gather for worship, and it has certainly been a while since I actually tried to preach a sermon. My last sermon I delivered was way back on January 19th, and the church building has been closed since March. In my case it was my health crisis, but for everyone, all this separation was caused by a teeny tiny virus called Covid 19.

Covid 19 is a Corona Virus, and these things are wreaking havoc on the world. The last one of significance, in Canada, was the SARS virus. But there are other scary ones out there. To say our lives have been disrupted, would be the understatement of the year. I saw posted recently on social media, a statement that sums it all up well. “Can we not agree that anyone who answered the question in 2015 ‘Where do you see yourself in five years.’ Got it wrong?”

We have new language that has arisen out of this experience. Especially the phrase “social distancing”. Who would have thought we could go into a bank wearing a mask and asking for money and not get arrested? The pandemic has led to some rather odd experiences, like in India where, citizens without masks were seen getting hard whacks on the behind by policeman with long sticks as punishment. When asked if the punishment was too severe, one constable responded, "Not at all. I'm just flattening the curve". Too soon?

Today marks a real effort on the church boards' part, to try and return us to some normalcy as a worshipping community. We have called today, and the service on the 23rd, a “soft opening”. The boards are working very hard to try and get procedures in place so that everyone is protected from the virus, if they so choose to come to a service. And also, to adhere to the guidelines of public health officials.

Some of our folks will decide to stay home, and watch on YouTube, and that is great, but some of you have missed sitting in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, even if the way we do worship is different, and maybe it will be, for some time to come. I do not know your motives for being here today, other than maybe you are like a man I read about.

A man who hadn't attended church in years suddenly began attending faithfully on Sunday mornings instead of going fishing as was his normal habit. The pastor was highly gratified, and at the end of service one morning told him, "How wonderful it makes me feel to see you at services with your good wife!" "Well, Preacher," said the fisherman, "Quite honestly, it's a matter of choice. I'd much rather hear your sermon than hers."

Well, whatever your motivation, whether you are physically present in the sanctuary today, or watching at home; welcome. In response to the pandemic, the deacons have asked me to prepare a message that speaks to these trying days we live in. And to better protect my recovering health status to do so by video. My first question was, what biblical passage even comes close to reflecting these challenging days? Then I remembered, while I was still recovering in hospital at Norfolk General, I had asked that very question.

What passage would I use to address the pandemic? In a flash, the Holy Spirit reminded me of a curious event that occurred in 2 Kings 7 that many people have likely never heard of, or explored.

The events before us in today's passage, occurred when Elisha was the prominent prophet. The king of Aram, whose name was Ben-Hadad, was at war with the northern kingdom of Israel, whose capital was Samaria. Elisha was giving advice to the king Jehoram of Israel, which helped Israel stave off the Aramean army. Time and time again, Elisha told Jehoram where the Arameans were so they could be intercepted. Ben-Hadad at first thought he had a traitor in his midst but then he got wind of the prophet's activities and ordered that Elisha be captured.

Elisha, at the time, was at Dothan, and so the army of Aram went to Dothan to get Elisha. To protect Elisha, God sent his own army of what we might call angels to protect Dothan.

God also struck the Aramean army blind, and Elisha was allowed to lead the army away from Dothan to the capital city of Samaria. Thus, began a terrible siege of Samaria. It lasted so long that famine came upon the city, so awful was the lack of food, that the people resorted to cannibalism. The King of Israel was so distraught, he called for Elisha's head. The king's right-hand man, his captain, declared that all this misery was from the hand of God.

Then Elisha prophesied, saying that in one day's time, flour and other goods will be in the market for their usual price. The king's captain would see this miracle, but would not enjoy any of the food, because he attributed evil to God. That's called blasphemy. Does this situation sound at least a bit familiar? A lock down, desperation, financial ruin and no end in sight. I have something to share with you today, that is going to require a stretch of faith to get a hold of. In fact, it is so far out there, that I know that some of you won't even reach for it.

I know today that I am speaking to some people who have been hit hard by this Corona virus pandemic. Some have been hit physically with the virus itself. Others have taken a financial hit. And I know that some of you listening to me today, have had the breath knocked out of you, and you are still reeling from the blow. And I know that when you have taken such a hard hit, it's hard to get your breath back, and it's hard to smile, and act like everything is fine when it's not.

Maybe you have heard so called preachers or modern-day prophets, tell you everything is going to be okay? So, go ahead and sing songs of praise and joyfulness they say. It is like salt being rubbed into our wounds, isn't it? How could, Christians be so cavalier about this devastating time in human history? Can you understand why the King of Israel or his captain, struggled to believe Elisha, when he talked about a return to a normal life.

How soon, when faced with a crisis, we forget who is in charge of this world, even when we are threatened by a pandemic. Where is our confidence that God has a plan, for each of us, for our families, our communities, and this world? Perhaps, like the King of Israel, you wonder how God could ever get us out of such a terrible situation. Perhaps God has as unique a plan for our situation as he did in Elisha's day. So, what happened to Elisha's words he spoke for God?

Well an unexpected twist in the story occurred.

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While all this terrible stuff was going on inside the city, outside the walls, near the gates of the city, four men who suffered with leprosy sat and waited to die. At one point one of the men, clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit and his own desperation, comes up with a logical response to their miserable situation. He says, “Why should we sit here waiting to die? We will starve if we stay here, but with the famine in the city, we will starve if we go back there.

So, we might as well go out, and surrender to the Aramean army”. I am not sure how they thought the Arameans would accept the surrender of four leprous men. He continued, “If they let us live, so much the better. But if they kill us, we would have died anyway.” (2 Kings 7:3-4) At twilight, the leprous men set out for the Aramean camp, and as they approached the edge of the camp, God made it sound as if a huge army was approaching.

The Arameans assumed that Israel had joined forces with the Egyptians or Hittites. The Arameans panicked, and ran off leaving everything behind. Animals, tents, and food. The four lepers went tent to tent eating and drinking wine, and hauling off gold and silver to hide for later. They finally came to their senses, and felt guilty that they ate their fill while the people of the city starved. So, they announced the good news, and Israel plundered the camp.

Sure, enough, people were able to buy food as Elisha predicted, but the king’s captain ate none of it, as he was stampeded to death at the gate by hungry hoards rushing out to plunder the camp. So, who was in charge of the situation? The Arameans, the lepers, the King of Israel, Elisha: no God was. So, in light of this pandemic, who is in charge? Let me be clear about something. I am not saying these things today to make light of the situation, and the circumstances that we are in.

I know there are multitudes of people right now that are hurting: physically, financially, emotionally, and spiritually. But God sent me here today, not to patronize or minimize your pain with jokes or sarcasm, but more like to be to be a lighthouse in the middle of your storms. A lighthouse in the midst of the darkness, and the gloom. To be like Elisha and used by God to shed a bit of light into these dark days.

A lighthouse-not to say you're not in a storm, and not to say that you don't feel like you're going under... But a lighthouse to say...Don't Quit. Don't Quit fighting. Don't Quit hoping. Don't Quit dreaming. Don't give in to the feelings of hopelessness. The lighthouse does not shine to deny the storms, or to pretend they don't exist. But the lighthouse shines to say... you can make it.

One foggy night, a United States Aircraft Carrier was cruising off the coast of Newfoundland and the junior radar operator spotted a light in the gloom. Here is a transcript of what happened next. The radar operator worked out that a collision was likely unless the other vessel changed its course. So, he sent a radio message. **U.S. Aircraft Carrier Radar Officer:** 'Please divert your course at least 7 degrees to the south to avoid a collision'.

Back came the reply: 'You must be joking; I recommend you divert your course instead'. The U.S. Radar Officer referred the matter to his superior officer. And reported the incident as insubordination.

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As a result, the Captain of the Air Craft Carrier sent a second message. 'I believe that I out rank you, and am giving you a direct order to divert your course now!!!' **Canadian Radio Operator:** 'This is a lighthouse. I suggest you take evasive action.'

The lighthouse says... There have been others before you that have been in storms just like you, some worse and some not as bad, and I guided them through. The lighthouse says... you can make it. The lighthouse says... the storm won't last forever. The lighthouse says... the sun will shine again. The lighthouse says... weeping may endure for the night but joy cometh in the morning.

This is what God is saying to us today. He said, prophesy and declare with boldness, "The Best Is Yet to Come". I know that's a stretch for some of you today, and I know that may sound like a foolish statement.

I know that some of us have been through some pretty rough days during all of this. You have had to deal with events and circumstances without your usual supports. But God is saying to you, that just like the lighthouse guides the storm-tossed, weary, sailors' home... those who believe his word in this storm will be guided to the best yet.

God is saying to us. He will not be out done by anything. Nothing, not even a Corona virus pandemic, can thwart God's plans or separate us from his love. When God gets through blessing you, you will wonder why we doubted, why all the fuss. When all the world seems to be pulling its hair out, we have a light guiding us home.

There is more to see here. Let's go back to our text, there is "Extreme famine, people are dying. They have even resorted to cannibalism to save themselves. Awful stuff! The prophet Elisha (The lighthouse) declares... By this time tomorrow the famine will be broken and also where there has been lack, and hopelessness and fear, there shall be plenty... there will be an abundance. There will be plenty of food and money.

I am sure that some were too overcome by their grief to even listen to the prophet. His words were like salt in their wounds, and they probably just ignored him. The truth is, hopelessness and despair can actually close your ears and eyes to better days. But one man spoke up. He was a right-hand man to the king. The captain actually denounced the prophet. He said, maybe, if the Lord should make windows in heaven, maybe this thing could possibly happen.

The king's captain publicly disputed and repudiated the Word of the Lord. The truth is, this man probably said what so many of the Samaritans were feeling, but he put it into words. The prophet answered him, it will certainly happen, and you will see it, but you will not benefit from it. In other words, you have decided for yourself your fate by the words you spoke. The city is locked up tight, the supply lines are cut off. They are in lock-down, they can't go anywhere.

Ben-Hadad the king of Syria gathered up all his host and besieged Samaria. And the Bible says, there was great famine in the city. Now, as I mentioned the story goes like this, there were four lepers outside the city gate, and they said to each other. Why sit here until we die. Let us fall into the hands of the Syrians, all they can do is kill us. So, they started moving toward their enemies.

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I need to say right here, that's where we're at right now. We need to start moving toward our enemies. And what is our enemy? Is it not hopelessness, despair, fear, loneliness? All of it under the guise of a Corona virus. Can you name your enemy? The Bible Says: in Isaiah 28:6 "God is for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate." In other words, God fights with them that fight.

So, as the unlikeliest of heroes walked toward the enemy the miraculous manifested. The Syrians heard the sound of an approaching army and they left everything. The lepers came to the place where their enemy had been.

And the Arameans were gone, and they left their tents, their horses, and their chickens, silver, gold, raiment, food, in other words... they left everything. And the word of the Lord spoken by the prophet Elisha was fulfilled. This is what the Lord spoke to my heart. Yes, we are in dire conditions. Yes, there is great need, and there is darkness, and there is great fear and dread.

But the Word of the Lord is always, no matter how dark it gets... "The best is yet to come". God is going to turn it around. Elisha said: Tomorrow about this time. I'm not prophesying this thing will turn in 24 hours, but tomorrow means to me... There is a better day coming. This is not the end. This darkness will pass, and the shine will shine brighter. God is not through blessing you.

Don't doubt in the dark what God told you in the light.

Keep your eyes on the lighthouse. Keep your eyes on the hope!

The Best Is Yet to Come.