

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Laura Crosby
Elisha and the Arameans
1 Kings 6:8-20**

How many of you have already taken a family vacation this summer? How many of you are still looking forward to planning a family vacation sometime this summer? Brave souls! All right! Well, about 20 years ago this month, we were taking our first family vacation to Colorado with our daughters, Katy and Maggie. Maggie was about 5 years old at the time. Katy was about 6. We had our snacks packed, I had my strategies ready, and John and I had already had the argument about videos or no videos. I won; we were going to do this the old-fashioned way with no videos. I'm not sure what I was thinking.

Neither of our girls had ever seen the mountains before and so they were really excited. You know how it is. You drive across the plains and as you get closer and closer, gradually you begin to see the outline of the mountains. As they got bigger, we were oohing and aaahing, saying, "Oh, they're so beautiful," but Maggie just sat there saying, "I do not see it." I said, "They're getting bigger. They're kind of purple in the distance. There's some snow." We were getting closer and closer but Maggie kept saying, "I do not see it." This turned into a joke in our family and now whenever we don't understand something that seems obvious, we say, "I do not see it." To give Maggie credit, she had never seen mountains before. She didn't know exactly where to look, close up or in the distance, or exactly what she was looking for. Her expectations of what the mountains would look like were different from the reality.

Sometimes it's not mountains, but it's God we're looking for and we want to say, "I do not see Him." Like Maggie who had difficulty seeing the mountains, there have been difficult seasons in my life when I have had trouble seeing God, when I have had trouble understanding or trusting His plans for me. One of those seasons was about 10 years ago. I had been deeply hurt, rejected, and betrayed in ways that left me feeling both discarded and between a rock and a hard place, really wondering where God was and how He was at work and what He wanted me to do. I like to go forward. As I read back over my journals from that time, they are filled with phrases like "I don't understand, Lord." "I can't see a way through." "I am filled with anger and pain and bitterness. Nothing makes sense. Where are You, Lord? When are You going to show up?"

I imagine many of you here this morning can relate to this. You may feel weary of being in a battle, and feeling surrounded or overwhelmed by circumstances that seem bigger than your God. As I prayed and prepared to speak today, I wondered what battles you might be fighting or what circumstances you're facing. Maybe the circumstances that you see look bigger than your God. Maybe you're fighting a battle for the hearts and souls of your children or you're fighting a battle against cancer or infertility. Maybe a spouse has walked out on you. Maybe your financial circumstances feel bigger than it seems God's resources are to provide for you. Or maybe

you're an addict or you're gay or you battle with obesity and it just feels so hard to hear God's loving voice above the echoes in your head of "not good enough." If any of these are true of you or of friends that you have, I think you're in the right place this morning.

Our Scripture passage this weekend is another hidden gem from the Book of 2nd Kings. It's a story about Elisha, his servant, and trying to see God in hard times. The stories in 1st and 2nd Kings often flip-flop back and forth between stories of the northern and southern kingdoms. If you remember, we're in a period in 1st and 2nd Kings where what we now know as Israel was divided into the Northern Kingdom, which was called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, which was called Judah. Today we're going to focus on the Northern Kingdom where the King is named Joram. Listen while I read the story about the prophet Elisha from 2nd Kings, chapter 6.

8 Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, "I will set up my camp in such and such a place." **9** The man of God

(that's Elisha we're talking about)

sent word to the king of Israel: "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there." **10** So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places. **11** This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, "Tell me! Which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?" **12** "None of us, my lord the king," said one of his officers, "but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom."

So you've got Elisha, the man of God, he's kind of this undercover, secret agent guy, telling the king of Israel what the king of Aram is going to do.

13 "Go, find out where he is," the king ordered, "so I can send men and capture him." The report came back: "He is in Dothan." **14** Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city. **15** 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."

Now just stop here for just a second. Remember in Scripture we always need to pay attention to words and phrases that are repeated. You will remember that this command "Don't be afraid" is repeated over 100 times in Scripture so it's one we need to pay attention to. It doesn't mean don't *feel* afraid. We are going to have emotions of fear but it means in those moments, remember God's presence and power. Then it says,

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.

This is something else we see repeated again and again in this passage of Scripture, the words see and saw and references to blindness. Our prayer today is that we can truly see God in His power.

18 As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, "Strike this army with blindness." So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked. **19** Elisha told them, "This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for." And he led them to Samaria. **20** After they entered the city, Elisha said, "LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see." Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria.

Trapped and surrounded! This can be a little confusing with the seeing and the blindness and all that but, basically, the people of God are blind to God's presence and need help to see that He is powerful and present, surrounded by angel armies. Then we have the enemy armies who can see but are struck blind and surrounded by the people of God. One of the reasons I love this passage is that it highlights the challenge to us to be a *with*-God people, to pay attention and recognize the presence and power of God *with* us, among us in everyday ways.

We read this passage and think that it is one of *those* stories. The big, exciting powerful angel armies come in and save the day. We want to say "Yes! Bam! Done!" We want to name it and claim it. We want those angel armies to cure our cancer or to fight the injustice we are facing. "Bring on those angel armies to protect our kids when they make bad choices." But we need to stop just a minute and stand back. We need to be careful we are not trying to make Scripture say what we want. There are all kinds of different literature in Scripture. The type we are reading today is a narrative. It is a true story but it is not a promise or prescriptive teaching so it's not like we can name it and claim it. We can't say that because it happened like this to Elisha, it is going to be true for us in exactly the same way. I can't pluck out this story and say that this is the way God is going to act in *my* life every single time when I'm in trouble. That is not the case.

In our narrative, one of the things we can pay attention to is God's character and what we can learn about it. You may have heard the line, *I don't know what the future holds but I know who holds the future*. Now it's a really good thing to know who holds the future but we need to ask, do we really? In order to see or understand the unseen, we need to know God's character. Elisha is given a glimpse of what is really here—God's presence and power. That's something we can learn about God's character that is true, but God's character isn't always easy and it's not always what we expect.

My friend Heather Zempel has a new book out called *Amazed and Confused*. The first line of the book is this: "God is not nice." When I read that, I think, wait a minute. God is love so God must be nice, but when I stop and think about it, she's right. God is love, but God is not nice in the comfortable, predictable, get-my-own-way-every-time kind of way that we might like. Think about other narratives in the New Testament. In one place those angel armies swoop in and miraculously free Peter from jail. Yet later Peter is crucified upside down. Where are the angel armies then? John the Baptist does this great job of preparing the way for Jesus and then he is beheaded. Where are the angel armies for John the Baptist? And then we have Jesus who was horrifically crucified and, granted, we know the next part of the story, that in three days He rose from the dead, but think of the disciples hurting in those three days where all they saw was the gruesome death and are wondering, where are the angel armies now?

Again, God's character isn't always easy, so I ask myself, what can we learn about God here? My friend Heather also wrote in her book, "God is love, but God's love does not promise us safety from the agonies of life; instead He is a God who is sovereign *over* the agonies of life."

That word *sovereign* is a religious kind of word we throw around a lot but it just means that ultimately God is in control. He is good and His plans will prevail in the end. Remember Jeremiah 29:11 that Lee Hanssen preached on a few weeks ago. The Message translation of that says,

¹⁰⁻¹¹ . . . I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you

That's sovereignty! So I want to ask again, what battles are you fighting? Where do you feel surrounded? Five years ago our daughter Katy had graduated from college, finished a year-long internship with Friends of the World, and was out of work. Those of you who know Katy know that she is freakishly smart and incredibly hard-working. It wouldn't surprise you to know that she created the spreadsheet to end all spreadsheets, documenting every single contact, every follow-up, every phone call, every thank you note that she ever made, but just because she went through the right steps didn't mean that God showed up in the way she expected or wanted. For nine months she was out of work. For some of you, it might be or have been a lot longer. Time after time she would come to the end of the process and be one of the last two candidates and then lose out. This was a time of intense prayer and spiritual formation for her as she tried to seek God, but also be honest about her frustration in trying to see God's plan.

There were some helps that Katy needed that I think we can benefit from, too. First of all, we need help to see the invisible. There is a spiritual battle going on that we can't see. It's like soldiers going into combat at night who can't see what's really there. Look at what happens without night vision goggles and then with them. [Slide shown.] On the left is what they see without help. That's what they see—black, but on the right with the help of night vision goggles, they can see what's really there. They can see the people on that mountain waiting to be rescued. The thing is that Scripture is kind of like night vision goggles. It helps us see the invisible.

Here's an example of that from another prophet, Daniel. Chapters 9 and 10 highlight a time when something is going on that Daniel cannot see. Daniel has prayed and it seems like nothing is happening. In Daniel 9 an angel shows up to encourage him.

²²⁻²³ “He stood before me and said, ‘Daniel, I have come to make things plain to you. You had no sooner started your prayer when the answer was given. And now I'm here to deliver the answer to you. You are much loved!’

Then in chapter 10, he says this.

¹²⁻¹⁴ “‘Relax, Daniel,’ he continued, ‘don't be afraid. From the moment you decided to humble yourself to receive understanding, your prayer was heard, and I set out to come to you. But I was waylaid by the angel-prince of the kingdom of Persia and was delayed for a good three weeks.’

When we pray, God hears and responds even though for a time, it may not seem like anything is happening. We are much loved even when we can't see and don't understand. There is a spiritual battle going on that we can't see. Maybe we should ask ourselves, “What is really going on here that I can't see?”

The second help we need is to see the big picture. Often we don't need more power; we need more perspective. There is a big picture we can't see. It's kind of like when you are putting together a puzzle. [Slide shown.] See all that dark mountain part down there. If the piece you are holding right now seems really dark, it may seem confusing. You are not sure how in the world all the puzzle pieces of your life fit together because you are seeing only a tiny piece, but God may be at work redeeming something that is part of a bigger picture. What seems dark at this time may be part of a bigger, more beautiful picture than we can see or that we will see this side of heaven.

The third help we need is to flip the magnifier. It's kind of like with binoculars. Often we magnify our circumstances instead of magnifying God, so maybe we need to flip the binoculars. Instead of seeing God as small and our circumstances as big, we need to see our circumstances as small and God as big. Somebody came up to me between services and said that she has a sign in her office that says, "Stop telling God how big your storm is and start telling the storm how big your God is." Maybe we need to ask ourselves, are we magnifying God or are we magnifying our circumstances?

Back to Katy. In the end Katy got the very first job she had interviewed for nine months earlier. She hadn't heard from them and had totally given up in frustration. It was her dream job as an analyst in international affairs doing research for Congress. She was technically not qualified for the job. She is still the only one at her level without an advanced degree, so it seemed counterintuitive, but for nine months the GAO, the organization that hired her, was working behind the scenes, getting their ducks in a row, and God was at work behind the scenes refining Katy's character.

Like you and me, Katy had felt surrounded by problems too big for her. She was discouraged trying to see God, but she learned that there was an unseen battle going on. She learned God did have a plan for her that she couldn't see and there was a purpose to His plan. So what about us? What would happen if Elisha's prayer became our prayer, "Lord, help us see." What if we were able to see God's presence in our adversity, in the midst of challenges and burdens? What if we live today as if God's sovereignty is not dependent on our circumstances? What if we live today as if God's love is sure even when we don't understand? What if we live today as if God is always present and active in our lives whether or not we see Him? What if we are able to recognize and experience that God's presence is learned behavior and our task is just to meet God in this moment now? If we live like that, don't you think we would be people of greater peace and assurance? What would people outside the community of faith see in us if we lived like that?

In closing I want to share a couple of stories with you. We have many friends who are fighting hard battles. We have two friends who are fighting battles with pancreatic cancer. Those of you who know about pancreatic cancer know that once you experience the symptoms and it is diagnosed, death usually comes very quickly. Often people die within a month or two. Our first friend Lee was diagnosed three years ago and is, basically, cancer free now. The angel armies showed up and we praise God that she is healthy and still with us. We are so thankful.

Steve Hayner, another friend, who this spring shortly after I had seen him at a prayer gathering in Washington, D.C. was also diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Some of you may remember him as he has preached here. He, too, is fighting a hard battle, but so far the angel armies have not swooped in. I want to read a couple of things the Hayners wrote on their CaringBridge site.

Recently Steve wrote, "Life is just plain different now. I like parts of my previous life better but the choices haven't changed. Every day has always been an opportunity for attentiveness, gratitude, and living into God's will."

His wife Sharol wrote, "I often feel like a little girl who keeps asking, 'Where are we going?' 'How long will it take to get there?' and 'What will it be like?' I know that allowing these questions to remain unanswered is what trust and faith are all about, and I do sense God's gentle care and reassurance of His presence as I wait to see around the corner and cannot." Then ironically, she wrote this. "In the midst of these questions, the Bible story that keeps coming to mind is from 2nd Kings 6. I think that the Lord is saying to me, 'Open your eyes and see my armies of faithful friends and angels and chariots of fire that are around you and Steve and your families, colleagues, and all those dear to you.' So that is my prayer. Open my eyes and let me see. It reminds me that we are not alone, that the battle is not ours but God's, and that basically, God asks me and us to stand still and see the victory of the Lord on our behalf one day at a time."

Two stories. In the first with Lee, it has been easy to see God's angel armies. In the second, it is taking faith and attention. So what does this mean for us? When we come to church, I don't think we just want more information. I really think that what we truly desire is transformation. We desire to become more truly the people of God, but that means that we need to sit in God's truth and integrate it into our everyday lives. In order to help you do that this week, we had some cards printed that we have placed at the end of each row. Take a card and pass them down. We would love it if you would take this card into your week. You could put it on the mirror in your bathroom or on your refrigerator or on the steering wheel of your car or in your Bible, some place where you will see it daily. I would encourage you to daily respond to each of these prompts.

- The first one is **Ask**. Ask yourself, what if I lived today as if God were present, powerful, and good?
- The second prompt is to **Pray**. Lord, I only see a small piece of the puzzle, but You see the whole thing. Help me to trust that You are good and Your character is not dependent on what I can see in this moment.
- The third is to **Memorize Psalm 125:2**.

2 As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.

- Then the last is an encouragement to **Read John 11:1-44**, another passage of Scripture where it seems like God doesn't act like maybe the people wanted Him to or in the timing they wanted Him to. I encourage you as you read this to ask yourself, what do I notice about God, what do I notice about myself, and what do I notice about the world as I read this?

I'm going to close with prayer now and I'm going to use a prayer that Jeremiah, another prophet, prayed. This is from Jeremiah 32, *The Message* translation. Will you bow your heads with me?

17 'Dear God, my Master, you created earth and sky by your great power - by merely stretching out your arm! There is nothing you can't do. **18** You're loyal in your steadfast love to thousands upon thousands - but you also make children live with the fallout from their parents' sins. Great and powerful God, named God-of-the-Angel-Armies, **19** determined in purpose and relentless in following through, you see everything that men and women do and respond appropriately to the way they live, to the things they do.

Lord, this week give us eyes to see You and hearts that trust You. In Jesus' Name.
Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.