

Angels Everywhere
II Kings 6:8-23
Fifth Sunday of Easter, (May 18) 2025
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Several years ago, Jane, the girls, and I were on sabbatical for the summer in England. One of the most memorable places we visited was Coventry Cathedral. Founded about the year 700 as a convent, which then grew into a parish church and then a cathedral by the 14th century. It had one of the tallest spires in all England, and in Nov. 1940, the Nazi Luftwaffe used the spire as a reckoning point and firebombed the city, including the cathedral, leaving only a shell of a building.

Rebuilt in the 1950's and 60's as a modern church, alongside and connected to the medieval bombed-out ruins, Coventry Cathedral made peace and reconciliation the hallmark of their ministry to this day. In the ashes after the fire, builders found nails that had been used in the medieval construction of the church and began making crosses of nails to remember the crucifixion of Christ and the crucifixions caused by war and violence. Soon a new Anglican order for prayer was founded called The Community of the Cross of Nails, which to this day has three presiding principles: healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity, and building a culture of peace.

[Hold up my Cross of Nails]

The most inspiring thing about Coventry Cathedral to me was the spectacular, large sculpture on an exterior wall of the Archangel Michael standing triumphantly over Satan lying in chains below him. Here was a church burned out

and bombed out, rising from the rubble, with the clear conviction that evil does not have the last word; darkness and despair will not win. God is at work. God's angels are everywhere. The Archangel Michael will defeat Satan.

Did you know that Michael is mentioned only four times in the Bible (twice in Daniel, once in Jude 9, and once in Rev. 12:7)? The only other angel by name in the Bible is Gabriel and he too is named four times (twice in Daniel, and twice in Luke 1). Just those two. Raphael and Uriel are named in the apocryphal books of Tobit and Enoch.

Christian tradition talks about angels a lot. For example, there are nine ranks of angels: seraphim at the top, then cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and then just plain angels at the bottom of the heap. Mighty Michael and Gabriel are mere archangels.

I say Christian tradition says all this because the Bible itself is reticent about angels. "Angel" is a word that means "messenger" and though they are not talked about much and when they do there is a lot of mystery about them, one thing you can know for sure: when angels show up, God is at work. Instead of thinking of angels coming from "up there" someplace, think rather of angels living in another dimension. And when they appear, it means that the work of God, and the kingdom of God is erupting into our world.

We're living in a time and place when we need to be reminded that we are not alone, and our lives are part of something much larger than us. There is more going on than we realize. And just when we are on the edge of giving up, a story like this one from the Old Testament comes along and renews our hope.

This is a story for people who are constantly being told false narratives. To hear and believe, to trust and lean into the narrative of the Living God takes tenacity and perseverance together. We, the people of God in Christ, stake our lives on a counter-narrative from the narrative that kings and wannabe kings tell. Kings hate stories like this one. And by the way, remember when you look up and read anything from the biblical books of I and II Kings, you always put a question mark after the word “Kings.” The prophets of God always ask, “And you call these guys kings?”

Our story says the King of Aram (or Syria) troubled the nation of Israel. That is, Aram kept sending raiding parties into Israel stealing their crops and livestock, deporting 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 give up and become a client state for Aram and pay a heavy annual ransom and tribute to Aram in order to keep Aram from fully invading 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 his ICE 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 ‘leak’ in my national security council.” 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 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 student intern, his disciple, goes outside to get the newspaper (they still newspapers in those days) 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, black unmarked vans, all gleaming in the morning sun. In a panic, the intern, 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 young student looks at him as if the old man is crazy. “You must be kidding, Elisha! We are surrounded by the Aramean army and Aramean ICE!”

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 military, but outside the Aramean army was a wider, encircling army of angels, “In a flame of zeal severe” to use John Milton’s words (PR V, 807). Flaming chariots and horses and angels on the surrounding mountains from horizon to horizon! The Aramean army surrounds Elisha and his student but, even though the army does not know it, they are surrounded by an even greater

angelic army. Unseen to all but Elisha and his intern, angels are everywhere.

This is a story for those of us who are in despair over being surrounded. It's a story for a small church surrounded by bigotry, racism, hatred, homophobia, poverty, violence, and just plain old meanness. This is a story for those of us surrounded by cancer and chronic illness, where we are worn down and exhausted. This is a story when we feel outnumbered and overwhelmed.

This is a story for a people who feel as if the few decent things left in this country are being rolled back. The whole idea of democracy is at question and the rich and powerful are cutting taxes for themselves, while cutting Medicaid and the SNAP food program for poor people, and on and on. It is unbelievable. It seems as if Sin and Death are winning, and the demons of darkness are in control.

Do you feel surrounded? This story is for you. You who feel there is no way out, and you don't know what you're going to do. This story is for when you feel surrounded.

There's a scene in John Ford's classic western, *The Searchers*, where a small party of Texas Rangers on horseback discover they have Comanches on both sides of them. Young Marty says to the Ranger captain, who also is a preacher, "Reverend, it looks like we're about to be surrounded." And the Reverend Captain replies, "Yeah, and we're about to get ourselves un-surrounded." And off they go on one of those classic chase scenes.

Well, Elisha does not say we are going to get ourselves un-surrounded. He says, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than are with them." In other words, God's power is greater than we realize and greater than the forces which

oppose God realize. The ones who are surrounding us are themselves surrounded.

My old seminary teacher, Glenn Hinson said that this is one reason we need to consistently pray this prayer of Elisha, “Open our eyes that we may see.” As we pray, God transforms our vision so we can see what is really out there.

This is not about the power of positive thinking. This is about what is real. We think of the real world as what we can see, touch, test, and so on. But the biblical story consistently tells us that the real world is more than what we think and more than we can touch. The truth is that we have blinders on; we refuse or we’re unable to see God and God’s work and we’ve been blinded for so long that we think it’s the real world. The biblical call is to re-vise what we see.

I’m here to tell you this morning there are more with us than are with them. We are not alone. We are not outnumbered. We are not powerless. And we are not mistaken. Open our eyes that we might see!

Well, the powerful Arameans start coming toward Elisha and so the prophet prays, “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 soldiers 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 makes what another of my old seminary teachers, Glen Stassen called, a “transforming initiative,” and prays again, “Open their eyes so they may see.” And immediately the Aramean army is able to see again. Of course, once their eyesight is restored, they are terrified. What in the world has happened? 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 killing, 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 troubled the land of Israel no more,” (II Kings 6: 23). Is this a great story or what?

The late New Testament scholar, Walter Wink, devoted his life to teaching people to see and live into the alternative story of the Living God, and that the world we inhabit is full of angels, powers, and principalities – fallen angels and powers who seek Domination, Sin and Death. But also, there are God’s faithful angels.

Wink had spent a couple of months during the mid-1980’s in Central and South America, teaching and training small communities of faith. All the while, he

witnessed great oppression and systemic violence wielded by those who thought they were kings and dictators. Over time, being immersed in this world of Sin and Death and the Powers of Domination, wore Wink down and he found himself overwhelmed by despair. He became increasingly angry and became physically ill. He wrote, “I had gone there to observe the Powers; I ended up their captive” (*The Powers That Be*, p. 7).

He came home and rested, worshiped, and prayed, immersed himself in the Bible and with God’s people. He wrote and was eventually invited to lead some workshops on nonviolence in apartheid South Africa. But the South African Powers That Be refused him a visa. Working with peace activists, he entered the country illegally and led a workshop with the theme song/hymn “Thine is the glory, risen conquering Son.” At the end of the workshop everyone prayed for Wink’s safe passage out of the country.

He and his co-workers approached a border crossing checkpoint where they believed they had the best chance of getting across without getting caught. Wink wrote that as they approached the checkpoint guard station, a torrential out-of-season rainstorm came, blackened the sky. They jumped out of the car and ran into the guard station for shelter. As they went inside, one of the officials was whistling the tune “Thine is the glory”! Furthermore, the electricity was out, and the interior of the station was so dark, that the official on duty asked Wink to read his own passport to him and never looked for or asked for a visa. Wink and his companions ran back to their car and drove across the border to safety.

Wink concludes, “We live in a remarkable time. There is liberation and change and miracles. But there is also much violence, domination, and economic

privation ... It is a time for hope; it is a time of despair. I have seen enough of God's wily ways with the Powers to stake my life on the side of hope" (p.17-18).

Austin Heights, there is much to worry about, and I know that we walk on the fine edge of despair, of giving up. But we have help that the world, the Powers That Be, and "king-wannabes" know nothing about. Whenever and wherever we do the right thing, the compassionate thing, the just thing, the loving thing, we are surrounded by the angelic hosts fighting for us. When we stand up for what is right and good, angels stand up with us.

And no matter how humdrum and mundane our lives may seem; we are nevertheless playing our part in a cosmic battle. Every angry and bitter impulse resisted, every act of kindness, every testimony to the Living Jesus, every act of resistance to Evil and Domination is part of the coming triumph of the Lamb of God, Christ Jesus.

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