

November 7, 2021

**God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha**  
**IX. By Faith, Not By Sight**  
**II Kings 6:8-23, II Corinthians 5:7**

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In Act I, Scene 5 of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet has just finished conversing with his father's ghost – who has revealed to Hamlet the true and terrible circumstances of his death. Hamlet's two friends, Horatio and Marcellus, come rushing up to Hamlet to see if he has survived his ghostly encounter. And it is then that Hamlet utters that famous rebuke: "*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy . . .*"

Do we believe that? Not do we believe in ghosts, but do we believe that there is indeed more to this world than what we take in through our five senses – more to this world than what we can see with our eyes or touch with our hands and so forth? That there is a divine, spiritual reality coexistent with and beyond this physical realm in which our daily lives play out? Earlier generations perhaps found it easier to believe so – to believe, for example, along with the poet Francis Thompson, that "*The angels keep their ancient places;— / Turn but a stone, and start a wing!*"<sup>1</sup> But we have been raised from the cradle, in this modern age, to be thorough empiricists – to believe only in what we, perhaps a little cavalierly, refer to as the "facts". Meaning that alone which we can see and touch, which we can test and confirm.

But there is no Christian faith apart from this belief in a world beyond this world, in a spiritual reality present within and beyond this earthly, physical reality. There is no Christian faith without a prior acceptance of this underlying premise that there is, indeed, more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. Indeed, it is this belief in the reality of the spiritual, the divine – that there is a truth surpassing that which we take in through our five senses – which is heart and soul of our Christianity. It's there in St. Paul's summary of what it means to live the Christian life – that we "*walk by faith, and not by sight.*" And faith, as the letter to the Hebrews defines it, is nothing less than "*the assurance of things hoped for, [and] the conviction of things not seen.*"<sup>2</sup>

Now only God can produce true faith in us – this conviction of things not seen. But what we can do this morning is to examine some of things the Bible says we come to know about this divine spiritual reality only through faith, and not by sight. Our story this morning has three scenes – and each scene reveals to us something important that we can only come to know about our life in this world, God's ways in this world, through walking by faith and not by sight.

Scene One – the war room of the king of Syria. Syria is once again at war with Israel, which in the past has usually led to easy Syrian victories over Israel. But this time is proving to

be frustratingly different for the king of Syria. It's as if every time he formulates a secret battle plan, the king of Israel seems to know exactly what that plan is. The king of Syria can only assume there must be a traitor in his ranks, so he calls together his inner circle and demands of them, "*Will you not show me who of us is for the king of Israel?*" "*It is not any of us,*" answers one of the servants. Instead, says the servant, it is Elisha, "*the prophet who is in Israel, [who] tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom.*" So, the king of Syria calls out to his entire army, "*Mount up! We're going to take care of this Elisha once and for all!*" One would think it might occur to the king that if Elisha knows all his plans as soon as he formulates them, that Elisha would know about this plan as well. But such is the way of kings. So off king and army go to put an end to Elisha.

So, what do we learn from this opening scene? Well, it has to do with where Elisha is getting his insider information. Last week, in the story of Naaman, we learned that Naaman's great military victories had come about only because the Lord had given him victory. This morning we see that the same is true of Elisha's foreknowledge of the king's plans. Elisha is a prophet of God, not a mystical mind-reader. What he knows about the plans of the Syrian king are coming to him only from the God before whom "*all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.*"<sup>3</sup> God is the One reading the mind of the king; God is the One passing on the plans to Elisha; God is the One by whom Israel is being protected.

In other words, what we learn from this first scene – something which we can only come to know by faith and not by sight – is that God really is present and active in this world of ours, present and active in these lives of ours, spiritually present and active here in this physical reality of space and time, taste and touch, which He created – all in order to make His will known, in order to make His Kingdom come, in order to bring about the purpose and plan by which He shall ultimately unite all things in Jesus. Beneath the ordinary cause and affect of what we perceive to be the way this world works, there is a hidden Cause bringing about hidden Affects – and that is our God, spiritually present and active in all things.

Let us confess: it is sometimes difficult for us to believe this. Mainly because God works in ways that seem always to stay just below our capacity for observation and recognition. Karl Barth, the great twentieth-century theologian, once put it this way: that God is "*so unassuming in the world,*" even though "*so revolutionary in relation to it.*"<sup>4</sup> But this, says the Bible, is something we can know by faith, even if we can't see it – that God really is present and active continually in our lives, continually in the life of this world, continually moving all things round to good. God is active and present in every moment, in every place, in every heart, in every event. To walk by faith and not by sight is to know, therefore, that God is always with us – behind us and beside us and before us – working out His purpose for us and for this world.

Herbert H. Farmer, another wonderful theologian of the last century, puts it this way:

*God is reticent . . . He gives us a lamp for our feet, but only for our feet – the darkness remains round about. The same is true of His overshadowing providence in our lives. We are assuredly guided, but how seldom we have a really intimate and indubitable sense of being guided. What a tiny distance we are permitted to see*

*into the future, what infinitesimal glimpses we are given of the patterns which the divine fingers are weaving . . . Indeed we have the feeling of still making our own stumbling judgments for ourselves and by ourselves. God remains in the shadows. It is only when we look back that we discern the way in which we have been led.<sup>5</sup>*

By faith, and not by sight, we know and confess that God is present and active in His world, always. That God, in the midst of human affairs, is quietly working out His great plan of salvation.

Scene Two. The Syrian army finds where Elisha is living and surrounds the city while he sleeps. In the morning, Elisha's servant arises, looks out the window, and starts to panic – everywhere he looks, the soldiers of Syria. *“Alas, my master!”* the servant cries. *“What shall we do?”* Elisha looks up from his morning coffee, glances out the window, and goes back to checking his emails. *“Do not be afraid,”* he tells his servant, *“for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”* The servant must have quickly concluded that his master had lost his marbles – for there are but two of them and how many thousands of Syrian soldiers just outside! How in the world does two outnumber thousands? Elisha puts down his laptop and begins to pray, *“O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.”* And immediately God opens the eyes of the servant so that he is able, by faith, to see what Elisha sees: that encircling the Syrian army, and greatly outnumbering them, is nothing less than the angel army of heaven – chariots and horses of fire. The Syrians could not see this, of course. But by faith, and not by sight, what the servant now sees is that there is, after all, no reason to be afraid. Those with them indeed far outnumber those against them.

And that's lesson number two of what it means that we walk by faith and not by sight. What we see with our eyes, see on the evening news, perceive on a daily basis is that this world is dangerous, life is precarious, security is never absolute. As Martin Luther puts it in his wonderful hymn, what we see every day is that this world, with devils filled, is always threatening to undo us. But what we see by faith is that truly we need not be afraid of this world – for the right man is on our side, the man of God's own choosing.<sup>6</sup> In other words, what faith teaches us, what sight cannot, is that indeed those with us always and greatly outnumber all those things which are against us. That though we cannot see it, often cannot even begin to sense it – but nonetheless through faith can be made sure of – is that we need not be afraid, ever. For what we see by faith is that *“the eternal God is our refuge, and beneath us always are the everlasting arms.”<sup>7</sup>*

Which reminds me of one of my favorite Walt Wangerin stories – which we can take as a parable of those everlasting arms which we know by faith if not by sight. Wangerin, a Lutheran writer and pastor, tells of how he would brag to his friends when he was a boy that his daddy was the strongest man in the world – that his daddy's arms were as strong as trucks. In fact, he would pick fights with the other boys over whose dad was stronger: *“My daddy's arms are as strong as trucks!”* One day, while Wangerin was perched about ten feet up in the crook of a cherry tree, a sudden and violent storm came up and trapped him in the tree. Then came one particularly strong gust of wind, which shook the tree and knocked him loose from his perch. He grabbed hold of a limb and hung there, screaming with all his might, *“Daddy! Daddy! Daddeeeee!”* His father appeared at the back door. Still hanging on for dear life, Wangerin cried out, *“Out here! Up here!”*

*Daddy, come get me!*” As his father came running, Wangerin said relief flooded through him – his daddy would climb right up that tree and get him down.

Only that wasn’t his father’s plan. Wangerin writes:

*He came to a spot right below me and lifted his arms and shouted, “Jump!”*

*“What?”*

*“Jump, I’ll catch you.”*

*Jump? I had a crazy man for a father. He was standing six or seven miles beneath me, holding up two skinny arms and telling me to jump. If I jumped, he’d miss. I’d hit the ground and die.*

*I screamed, “No!” At least I could feel the bark of the branches against my body. “No!”*

*I made up my mind. I’d stay right here till the storm was over. I closed my eyes and hung on.*

*But the wind and the rain slapped that cherry tree, bent it back, and cracked my limb at the trunk. I dropped a foot. My eyes flew open. Then the wood whined and splintered and sank, and so did I, in bloody terror.*

*No, I did not jump. I let go. I surrendered.*

*I fell.*

*In a fast, eternal moment I despaired and plummeted. This, I thought, is what it’s like to die –*

*But my father caught me.*

*And my father squeezed me to himself. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and felt the scratch of his whiskers on my face and began to tremble and began to cry. He caught me. Oh, my daddy – he had strong arms indeed. Very strong arms.*

*But it wasn’t until I actually experienced the strength that I also believed in it.*

*And I myself did not choose so frightening an experience. The storm did.*

*Horrible storm. Wonderful storm.*

*It granted me what I had had all along, but what I had not trusted. A father with arms as strong as trucks.<sup>8</sup>*

This we know by faith and not by sight: the eternal God is our refuge and beneath us always are the all-powerful arms of our God. And that this God, who is on our side, will always prove stronger than whatever it is which stands against us and frightens us. And so we need not be afraid – for what we know by faith, as Elisha’s servant came to know, is that those who are with us are indeed greater than those who are against us. That there is, in fact, nothing in life, nothing on the face of this earth, which can ever separate us from the love of God.<sup>9</sup>

Scene Three. In a moment reminiscent of Obi-wan Kenobi and the stormtroopers in the very first Star Wars movie<sup>10</sup>, the Lord strikes blind the entire Syrian army so that they believe and

follow Elisha when he says to them, *“This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.”* And the entire Syrian army follows him all the way into the capital city of Israel, where they are quickly surrounded by the entire Israelite army. Elisha then prays for their eyes to be opened, and they are – and they realize there is no escape and that they are about to die. In fact, that is what the king of Israel immediately wants to do – kill them all. But God intervenes through His prophet. Rather than a massacre, there shall be a feast. The king of Israel, at God’s command, prepares a great feast for his greatest enemy, for the entire Syrian army – Israelite and Syrian soldiers breaking bread together in peace. This feast God brings about is, in fact, so extraordinary, that there follows a long and lasting peace between the two countries.

And here’s what I think this scene is revealing to us about what we learn as we walk by faith and not by sight – that, in the end, God’s peaceable Kingdom really shall overcome all our divisions, all our hostilities, all our hatreds. That what we may know by faith – even despite all that we see with our eyes of the seemingly irreconcilable differences which plague this world as it is – is that where God is leading this world is to that day in which, indeed:

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,  
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze;  
their young shall lie down together . . .  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.<sup>11</sup>*

What we can know by faith and not by sight is that in the end God’s love shall win. In the end, God’s peace shall prevail, and all will be reconciled to Him and to one another. In the end, that peaceable Kingdom of God shall come on earth, as it is already in heaven. So let us, then – like Elisha, like Paul – walk by faith and not by sight. And so, in our own time and in the places of our own habitation, work to sow and nourish the seeds of that peace which is to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Thompson, “The Kingdom of God.” For the full poem, see: [245. The Kingdom of God by Francis Thompson. Nicholson & Lee, eds. 1917. The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse \(bartleby.com\)](#) .

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:1.

<sup>3</sup> A portion of what is often referred to as the “Prayer of Purity”, appearing in the liturgy of many denominations.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), p. 291.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert H. Farmer, *The Healing Cross* (London: Nisbet & Company, 1938), pp. 79-80.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”.

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 33:27.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Mourning Into Dancing* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 266-268.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:38-39.

<sup>10</sup> [Move Along, Move Along | Star Wars: A New Hope | StarWars.com](#) .

<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 11:6-9.