

'There Are More with Us than There Are with Them'

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2 Kings 6:8-23
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The text we've just heard is one of my favorites. The king of Aram—basically what is today modern Syria—is frustrated because his army's maneuvers seem to be anticipated in every instance by the Israelite army. He's losing every strategic advantage.

Before, he thought his generals were simply losing their edge. But the evidence now is overwhelming: He's got a security breach; a spy in their midst; a mole inside his intelligence operation. Hackers have penetrated his firewalls. Wikileaks is broadcasting his campaigns.

So the King calls together the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He demands to know the source of this security breach.

One of his generals speaks up. "Your majesty, everyone's passed their lie detector tests. We don't exactly know how, but we're pretty sure the prophet Elisha overhears your most private conversations."

"So just where is this Elisha What's-His-Name? You say he's in Dothan?"

"Yes sir."

"Dothan, Alabama?"

"No sir—Israel."

"Well, get Navy Seal Team 6 on the phone. Tell them we a rendition assignment. Let's call it Operation Prophet Snatch."

The orders were given, the assets were mobilized. Elisha won't know what hit him.

A few days pass. The prophet Elisha's student intern wakes early in the morning, puts on the coffee, and goes out to get the newspaper. He's still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes when he reaches down to get the paper. But as he rises, his gaze fixes on the frightening sight. There are hundreds of horses and chariots and soldiers with weapons drawn surrounding the house.

The intern races back into the house, runs to the prophet's bedroom, and begins screaming—almost incoherently. "Alas, master! What shall we do?"

Elisha takes it all in without emotion. Then he says: "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them."

"More with us than there are of them? Are you sure?"

There's many a day when I don't think there are more with us than there are of them. Many a day when I feel outnumbered, out-gunned, out-funded and overwhelmed. What about you?

More with us than there are of them? There's many a day I doubt that assessment. Our president says we're not really at war with Libya, because there is no "credible threat of casualties." In other words, if they can't shoot back, we're not really fighting.

I'm not sure there are more of us when I read that the projected military budget for 2012 is over \$1 trillion, more than triple the total for 2001; or that our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan cost us \$120 billion a year; or when I read that every one of those Tomahawk missiles costs a million dollars. Or another way to say it—every one of those missiles costs us another 25 teachers.

When numbers get this big, I pretty much fog over. But here's a frame of reference that might help: A million seconds is 12 days. A billion seconds is not quite 32 years. A trillion seconds is 31,688 years.

I'm not sure there are more of us when I learn that one U.S. carrier has more sailors than the U.S. State Department has diplomats. Or that the *annual* cost of the federal Women, Infants and Children health and nutrition budget is about the same as *one week* of the tax reductions of the wealthy from the Bush-era tax cuts.

I'm not so sure there are more of us when I hear that "The correlation between student achievement and your postal zip code is 100 percent. Which is to say, the quality of education you receive is entirely predictable based on where you live."* And where you live in this country depends largely on income and race.

I'm not sure there are more of us, knowing that the United States has more than 800 military bases in other countries. Back in January, I happened to be watching one of the college football bowl games. At one point, the television announcer announced: "We welcome the men and

women in America's armed forces stationed in 175 countries who are watching this game via the Armed Forces Network." *175 countries?!*

As a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement, Mexico now has the distinction of having more millionaires per capita than any nation on earth. And the highest escalation of poverty. Hundreds of Mexicans die every year trying to cross into the U.S., mostly from exposure and dehydration, mostly along the desert border with Arizona. When you realize these two facts—record numbers of millionaires, record numbers of immigrant deaths—it's hard to believe that there are more with us than there are with them.

With so much evidence to the contrary, how can it be that there are more with us than there are with them? What did Elisha know that we often fail to see? Let's pick back up with the story.

First, Elisha prayed that God would open the eyes of his intern. And sure enough, suddenly he saw that an army of angelic chariots of fire surrounded the army of Aram. Then Elisha prayed that God would blind the Aramean soldiers. And so it came to pass. Then Elisha strolled out his front door—with all these soldiers stumbling around because they couldn't see—and he said, "Hey, I hear you're looking for that prophet, Elisha. That true?"

"Yes," cried one of the generals. "Do you know where he is?"

"Sure," Elisha responded. "Take my hand. I'll lead you to where he is." And so the Arameans fell in line, each holding onto the shoulder of the one in front, frequently tripping and falling as Elisha led them on.

Where did he lead this battalion of blind soldiers? Right into the walled city of Samaria, in the heart of the Israelite kingdom! Then the city gates were slammed shut, and the Israelite soldiers prepared for a slaughter.

The king of Israel was ecstatic. He could hardly believe his eyes. And he rubbed his hands together, asking, "Can we kill them now?"

But Elisha said "No! There will be no killing." And the prophet ordered that a feast be prepared for the Aramean soldiers. Then they ate, and they drank, and were sent on their way back to Aram.

Then the story comes to a screeching halt with one simple sentence: "And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel."

Can it really be true that there are more with us than there are with them?

Well, I know the world's sole superpower was taken by surprise at the uprisings across the Arab world this past spring, even toppling the 30-year brutal rule of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. His ruthless government, by the way, was the second highest recipient of U.S. foreign aid.

Year after year—sometimes week after week, or even day after day—each one of us is required to answer whether we really believe there are more with us than there are with them. Our answer dictates the way we live our lives: how we spend our assets, whose opinions we trust, whose voices we listen to, what promises we rely on.

It's a question about power. And every question about power is a question about God. Each week, when we come to the communion table, we're asked to decide anew.

I'll leave you with this parable of a dream, written by South African novelist Olive Schreiner in *Dreams*:

I saw a desert and I saw a woman coming out of it. And she came to the bank of a dark river; and the bank was steep and high. And on it an old man met her, who had a long white beard; and a stick that curled was in his hand. And he asked her what she wanted; and she said, "I am a woman; and I am seeking for the land of Freedom."

And he said, "It is before you."

And she said, "I see nothing before me but a dark flowing river, and a bank steep and high, and cuttings here and there with heavy sand in them."

And he said, "And beyond that?"

She said, "I see nothing, but sometimes, when I shade my eyes with my hand, I think I see on the further bank trees and hills, and the sun shining on them!"

"That is the Land of Freedom."

"How am I to get there?"

"There is one way, and one only. Down the banks of Labour, through the water of Suffering. There is no other."

"Is there no bridge?" she asked.

"None," he replied.

"Is the water deep?"

"It is. Your foot may slip at any time, and you may be lost."

"Have any crossed already?"

"Some have tried!"

"Is there a track to show where the best fording is?"

"It has to be made."

She shaded her eyes with her hand; and she said, "I will go. . . ."

And she stood far off on the bank of the river. And she said, "For what do I go to this far land which no one has ever reached? Oh, I am alone! I am utterly alone!"

But the old man said to her, "Silence! What do you hear?"

And she listened intently, and she said, "I hear a sound of feet, a thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands, and they beat this way!"

He said, "They are the feet of those that shall follow you. Lead on! Make a track to the water's edge! Have you seen the locusts, how they cross a stream? First one comes down to the water-edge, and it is swept away, and then another comes and then another, and then another, and at last with their bodies piled up a bridge is built and the rest pass over."

She said, "And, of those that come first, some are swept away, and are heard of no more; their bodies do not even build the bridge?"

"And are swept away, and are heard of no more—and what of that?" he said. . . . "They make a track to the water's edge."

And she said, "Over that bridge which shall be built with our bodies, who will pass?"

He said, "The entire human race."

And the woman grasped her staff.

And I saw her turn down that dark path to the river.

And I dreamed a dream.

I dreamed I saw a land. And on the hills walked brave women and brave men, hand in hand. And they looked into each other's eyes, and they were not afraid.

And I said to him beside me, "What place is this?"

And he said, "This is heaven."

And I said, "Where is it?"

And he answered, "On earth."

And I said, "When shall these things be?"

And he answered, "In the Future."

*Kevin Huffman, "A Rosa Parks moment for education," *Washington Post*, February 1, 2011.

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