

So now hear the word of the Lord:

*Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers. He said, "At such and such a place shall be my camp." But the man of God [Elisha] sent word to the king of Israel, "Take care not to pass this place, because the Arameans are going down there." The king of Israel sent word to the place of which the man of God spoke. More than once or twice he warned such a place so that it was on the alert. The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this; he called his officers and said to them, "Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?" Then one of his officers said, "No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber." He said, "Go and find where he is; I will send and seize him." He was told, "He is in Dothan." So he sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night and surrounded the city. When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, "Alas, master! What shall we do?" He replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them." Then Elisha prayed: "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. When the Arameans came down against him, Elisha prayed to the Lord and said, "Strike this people, please, with blindness." So God struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked. Elisha said 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 he led them to Samaria. As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O Lord, open the eyes of these men so that they may see." The Lord opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria. When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha, "Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?" He answered, "No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink, and let them go to their master." So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.*

During these worrisome times, some of us – myself included – feel like Elisha's servant, freaking out at the great massed army looming down on us, ready to destroy us and everything we stand for and hold near and dear. Elisha's servant articulated the angst: "Alas! What can we do? We're surrounded! We can't get out! How can we escape them? How can we fight them? We're just two people. What are we going to do?" And there was Elisha, sitting calm and complacent and unperturbed. How could he be so calm? The Aramean king's army was out to get him for telling his plans to the king of Israel. He sent a whole slew of soldiers – a great army – an ancient I.C.E. incursion – to seize Elisha and bring him, deport him, to Aram, no doubt to torture him before finally slaying him. When he saw the siege and the vast army surrounding the city, Elisha's servant naturally panicked. He hadn't been serving Elisha long so he most likely did not know about the power of this prophet of Israel. Elisha had taken up the mantel of his predecessor, Elijah, and he knew what god could do. With God's power, he had cured a man of leprosy. He had even resurrected a boy who had died. The Aramean army didn't daunt him a bit. He knew he was protected against them. That's why he could sit so serenely and say to his servant, "Chillax, bro." He asked God to open his servant's eyes – his unlimited spiritual eyes, so he could see things his limited physical eyes couldn't see. And the servant saw what Elisha saw: a vast angelic army all around them. The unseen host outnumbered the Aramean army. Elisha had seen those

chariots and horses of fire before, when his mentor Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind by them. Fire was a sure sign of god's power. Fire purified and clarified and refined things. Elisha knew he could call on that fiery army to wipe out the Aramean troops – flash over them and burn them up. But that was not the angel army's purpose right then. Their purpose was to reassure his scared servant that even when things seem to be out of control and danger and destruction are imminent if not inevitable, God was still in control.

I don't know about you, but reading these words has helped calm me down a bit. Just imagining a vast force of goodness and righteousness surrounding me has been a source of comfort during these dizzying, dismaying days. Psalm 34:7 says, "The angel of the lord encamps round those who fear him and delivers them." We look at the forces amassed before us and we can feel our hearts sinking and our souls shrinking – because we are using our *physical* eyes. But knowing there are otherworldly warriors encamped around us and seeing them with our *spiritual* eyes gives us the strength to resist and persist and insist that goodness and righteousness must and will prevail. God's angels – an innumerable host – are ever and always guarding those of us who love God and serve God and who are certain that excluding, denigrating, disposing, dispelling and disrupting are not God's will for God's people. We have those angels of our better nature ready to join us in the fight for honor and equity and justice and decency. God calls us to mercy. We're clearly shown this in Elisha's actions. When he saw the army, he asked God to strike them with blindness – not to strike them down entirely and utterly, although God could certainly have done that, but with loss of sight. This was not physical blindness, where the army could see nothing but darkness; it was more of a mental fog, a hallucination, an illusion, a delusion, an inability to discern just what was going on around them. It was a blindness that made them stupid and confused and stubbornly unwilling to admit to the truth, that their mission was immoral and wrong. It enabled Elisha to led them right into Samaria, right into enemy territory. Then Elisha prayed for a reversal of the spell, that they would be able to see again. Once the Arameans were back in their right minds, they must have been terrified to see they were in Samaria. Instead of capturing Elisha, they themselves were now captives. They must have thought, "This is it, we're all gonna die. Our enemy has us to rights and they will destroy each and every one of us." Indeed, that was the overeager instinct of Jehoram, the king of Israel. His rival king's army was at his disposal. He could wipe out the Aramean war machine right then and there and have done with them once and for all. Hand on sword, he confronted Elisha: "Shall I kill them? Shall I kill them? Lemme kill them!" But Elisha gave him an answer of mercy: "No! We're not going to kill them. We're going to feed them and give them water and then send them back to their own country." It was quite a biblical thing to do. Jesus says in Luke 6:28, "Love your enemies. Do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you." Proverbs 25 verses 21-22 says: "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat, and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink, for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the lord will reward you." Elisha commanded a graceful response for those who had been blind, not a response of revenge. Don't kill them. Feed them. Take care of them. Comfort them. And then send them back home with their eyes open, their strength renewed, and their minds clear.

When Elisha first faced off against the Aramean army, he said to them, "This is not the way." He looked at the men arrayed for battle, ready to follow their inane king's disastrous dictates, and he knew they were being misled and misused and duped. "This is not the way" to make things right. This is not the way to create peace and calm and unity and harmony. This is not the way to show

greatness. They had been blinded and betrayed. They had been duped and deluded into ignorance and complacence, believing they had been told the truth – that Elisha was the enemy – and that the king cared about them and would take care of them if they gave him unquestioned loyalty. They were being used and manipulated by the scheming, scamming king but they couldn't see that. With grace and compassion and sympathy, Elisha opened their eyes to the reality of their mental and moral entrapment and showed them a better way. He asked God to take away their confusion and cure their distorted vision so they could see things as they truly were. They saw for themselves the power and provision of god. Their dangerous delusions were removed. Though they now had to face a harsh reality, Elisha made sure they were well fed on truth and justice and had their thirst for acceptance and purpose quenched. Elisha conquered them with kindness. That is what the Lord requires of us – to do justice, to love mercy, and demonstrate kindness even to our enemies. The Arameans learned their lesson. They took Elisha's compassion into their own hearts. They never attacked Israel again. And all throughout this mess, Elisha prayed. "Open their eyes that they may see – take away, God, the spiritual blindness afflicting people these days that renders them unable, incapable of distinguishing good from bad, wrong from right, mercy from cruelty, sanity from insanity." Like Elisha, we have to keep praying. My prayer is that God will open our spiritual eyes. What we're seeing with our physical eyes is scary enough, so we need God's assurance to calm us, preserve us and strengthen us. God tells us: We have angels all around us. And they come prepared. Falsehoods, selfishness, egoism, narcissism, wrong thinking, anger – these are the world's miserable weapons. They are nothing compared to the weapons God gives those who truly follow and serve God: love, truth, righteousness, justice, humility. We have the armor of God to help us in this unholy fight. We have the waistbelt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. Our sandals are laced with the gospel of peace, not with the combat boots of chaos. We wield the shield of faith, and we use it to quench and dispense with all the flaming arrows of the evil ones. We wear the helmet of salvation and we unsheathe the sword of the Spirit, the word of God that comes to challenge and comfort us when we most need it to. It's exactly the outfit the angels have on. The unseen power of god is on the side of right and good, on the side of diversity, equality and inclusion and justice. We may feel outmatched and overwhelmed right now, but there's an invisible army of angels surrounding us and watching what's going on and they're sending heavenly help. These angels are offering sanctuary, making calls, marching, resisting, persisting! We are not alone. Do you think angels are meek and mild and gentle? No, they're armed and arrayed against armies of error and terror, and they're ready to rumble for righteousness. And we are ready, too!

*Open our eyes, Lord God, to see your fiery chariots surrounding us, all the celestial warriors mustered and marshalled, fighting with and for us. "Let not us then be overcome of evil, but help us overcome evil with good." Give us Elisha's patience and calm and compassion. Give us the strength to stand against that which tries to defeat and distress and demoralize us. Give us the persistence to go the distance and claim the victory for you and with you. Amen.*