

Trinity 21 (EP-3) (2018) (1 Kings 6:8-23)

Are you a pessimist or an optimist?

Well, some people seem to be born one way or the other . . . or maybe it's their early experiences that influences them. Or, maybe, it's a bit of both – nature and nurture. It's hard to say.

What about you, though? Where do you fit in on the spectrum?

More than that, what stance should a person who names the name of Jesus Christ strive for in this matter.

Well, the key verse in today's Old Testament lesson points us in the right direction. It is verse 16 of the 6th chapter of 2 Kings. Here we read:

“Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.”

The background of these words is that Elisha's servant, a man by the name of Gehazi, looked out and saw Syrian soldiers surrounding the city of Dothan, the city in which they were lodged. The mission of these soldiers was to capture his master and take him back to the King of Syria.

Elisha's servant panicked. He could see only doom and gloom. I think we would have to say he was a pessimist.

Elisha, meanwhile, when told about the same thing, took quite a different stance. He was confident that God was going to provide a way out. He was an optimist.

And His optimism was rewarded with sight. He looked out and saw an even greater army surrounding the city, the army of the Lord God Almighty.

What was the source of his optimism? Was it a blind optimism?

I don't think so. I think it sprang from a succession of God's faithful acts in the past. No matter how grim the situation Elisha had learned to trust in God.

As we have already seen, his confidence in God was rewarded with sight. God opened his eyes to a greater reality, and he in turn was able to say to Gehazi:

“They that be with us are more than they that be with them.”

If you think about it, Elisha’s experience is not that unique. You and I often find ourselves surrounded by fears, dangers and uncertainties. Perhaps that is your situation at this very moment.

The question is: How do we remain steady (an optimist) at such times?

I think we can get our answer from Elisha. It is by remembering God’s past acts of faithfulness and by being prepared to have our eyes opened to His present presence and provision.

A related thought is: Claim the promises that are made to God’s people in Scripture.

Look, for example to the final book in the Bible. Here we read:

“The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

Scripture tells us in advance that God wins. Good prevails. This is the greater reality.

If you think about it, little more than a ‘dash’ or a ‘blink’ separates our ‘now’ from God’s final victory over sin and death.

Looking at life this way does not make all life’s trials and tribulations go away or pleasant. We don’t go around singing “alleluia” every time we hear of a school shooting or a terrorist attack.

Yet, in the end we know all will be well. All accounts, settled.

How many times do we hear in Scripture the words (or some variation thereof) Elisha spoke to his servant: **Fear not?**

I must admit I have never counted them, but I am told that there are well over 100. Here is brief sampling, two from the Old Testament, one from the new:

“Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest” (Joshua 1:9)

“**Fear thou not**; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (Isaiah 41:2).

And from the New Testament:

An angel of the Lord said to Paul: “**Fear not**, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee” (Acts 27:24). The ‘them’ are fellow prisoners who are on their way to Rome.

Well, you get the point: Fear not.

Without leaving this thought behind, allow me to highlight two additional insights found in this morning’s reading.

The first concerns **the few among the many**, “the majority of the minority,” we might say.

If ‘fear not’ is a reoccurring theme in the Bible, so is this principle of the ‘few among the many’.

Think, for example, of: David against Goliath and the army of the Philistines, Gideon against the armies of the Midianites, Daniel against the those in Babylon who wished him evil and, of course, the story found in this morning’s reading, Elisha and his servant against the Syrian army.

Beyond the biblical record, moreover, we see this principle played out in more recent events.

Think about the period between September 1, 1939 (the beginning of the Second World War in Europe), and December 7, 1941 (the date the United States entered the war).

In this period, Great Britain stood almost alone against the Axis – Hitler, Mussolini and that gang of thugs.

In all these cases – Biblical and modern -- “the few” – with God’s help – prevailed.

There may be times in your life when you are called to stand with ‘the few’ or even alone. Will you be able to stand the test? Will I? I pray we will.

I might add: Sometimes God settles the account on this side of the divide; at others on the other. Either way, we are promised a crown of life.

In the words of the hymn, “When duty calls or danger, be never wanting there.”

But there is another insight we should not miss from this passage. So far, we have looked at “fear not” and “the few among the many”. Let’s turn now to “seeing the unseen”.

God opened Elisha’s eyes so he could see the larger army of the Lord surrounding the city. Later, the eyes of Elisha’s servant were opened to this greater reality.

Both were allowed to see behind the veil that usually separates earth [our space] from heaven [God’s space]. That veil in biblical times occasionally gets pulled apart, as it did this day, but can it happen now? I say, yes.

I have a friend who back in the 90s’ worked as the land development officer in Cherokee County, North Carolina. He had just such an experience. Let me quickly say he is a very creditable person, by training a journalist and now a clergyman. His story goes like this:

During his time at this job, Cherokee County enacted a policy which angered a number of backwoods folk. I don’t remember what it was now.

In any event, soon thereafter he and his wife began receiving threats.

One evening there was to be this great showdown at the county courthouse. Members of a certain “taxpayers’ league” were expected to show up and act out.

At the time, my friend’s office was just down the street from the courthouse. As he prepared to leave and walk that way, he paused to say a prayer in which he asked God to shield him from harm.

As he neared the courthouse, he could see a large number of ‘rowdies’ milling around on the courthouse steps. He just kept looking ahead, and when he arrived, the crowd let him go through unhindered.

Well, everyone calmed down. The meeting went well. The crisis passed.

The story continues sometime later when his car broke down. He was on a rural road, and it was late at night.

You will never guess who stopped to help? It was the leader of this taxpayer' league. By this time there was no anger, and the man gave him much appreciated assistance.

Before they parted, the man said:

“Remember that night at the courthouse?”

My friend nodded.

“There is something I been wanting to ask you. Who was that big guy that you brought with you that night?”

My friend said: “I didn't have anyone with me. I came alone.”

“But, you did,” he insisted. “We all saw him and wondered who he was. We thought he was your body guard.”

My friend had no answer. He still hasn't . . . other than God is still in the business of opening eyes – this time the eyes of those who potentially wished him ill.

The hymn with which we shall be closing this service perhaps says it best:

Go forward, Christian soldier,
Fear not the secret foe;
Far more o'er thee are watching
Than human eyes can know.

As Christians, Do we have cause to be optimists in an uncertain and unsafe world? You bet we do!

Open my eyes, Lord, that I may see. Amen.