

If What You Fear Does Not Exist

Sermon delivered by Rev. Stephen Phelps
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
June 30, 2024

Scripture: [2 Kings 6:24—7:21](#); [Luke 19: 39-42](#)

The nation is besieged.

Disaster has come. The rulers can't rule, the people are mad. Unlike in this story, of course, our mothers are not serving boiled baby for breakfast but all over this world, deeply disturbed men and women want to rule as kings and despots—in short, as outlaws—for no law can touch them. Except the law of nature who, like a great steed, is rearing heavenward to buck from its back the burden of us all, for abusing it and starving it of wisdom. Even dictators fall to the law of nature.

Today's disasters in *nature* are not natural; we brought them on through hunger for ease and wealth. But who with a microphone says that? Newscasters excitedly report from fire, flood, drought, ice, and storm, yet almost never do they acknowledge what causes these. They still call the events "once in a century". Most electeds will not discuss. The moderators of the recent debate hardly touched this wound in the world, this first-of-its-name catastrophe, whom all confront, while Mr. Trump, with millions cheering, denies it: "a hoax."

In the turning of human affairs, things change. But can they *be* changed? You watch a wondrous murmuration of starlings wheeling in the sky at twilight. Their courses change. But can they be changed? Does any bird have that skill? Does any person, any pack of people, have the skill and strength to change the course of events wheeling on and on? Some say yes but evidence weighs not heavy on that scale. I don't know.

So complete is the evidence that our pouring forth CO₂ will cause the planet to cease from abounding in what we animals need, and so replete is history with sagas of humans never choosing cooperation to change the course of events wheeling toward disaster, but choosing denial, denial, denial, that this much comes clear: the demise of democracies, the violent power politics, and the ruin of the climate don't just happen to be happening all at once; no, they are all the same monster in different guises. They are one disease, a spiritual disease.

The Bible tradition calls the disease "desires of the flesh"—alas—since everybody goes nuts on hearing that. But the meaning of the ancients is plain. Desires of the flesh means thinking ultimate happiness must come from getting what we want. It means addiction to things we want. It means fear we will not get it and despair when we don't. Once it meant cotton was king and slavery the offering to that god. Now it means oil is god and the only prayer is "*drill, baby, drill*" with denials so violent that in Florida, for example, it is

illegal for teachers to say climate change to children. Or white racism. It is a spiritual disease. And the comfortably religious are especially prone to it if they believe that saying *Jesus, Jesus* vaccinates them against evil. It does not.

Yet: If what we fear does not exist? Odd. On its own terms, whatever we imagine . . . does not exist. Except in imagination. We are responsible for what we imagine, and for the time we give, or kill, thinking about it.

In the strange tale we heard this morning from the Elisha sagas, the Bible holds treasures for dealing with fear. And dealing with fear is the essential for finding common ground when things fall apart. The opening scene is no longer very hard to get a feeling for. Famine, crushing inflation, child murder, faithlessness, despair have broken over the people. Their unchosen leader is unfit to rule. He seeks retribution, blaming one man, Elisha, for all the troubles the people face. But Elisha, facing execution, keeps calm. *About this time tomorrow, inflation is over and everybody eats*, says he. One label for the story might be "miracle," but Elisha is not the magic man. He is sure that what you fear does not exist, that good will come. But he does not have power to make that happen. He doesn't even know how it will happen. Things change. But can they *be* changed?

The good that comes to Israel depends on the four leprous men whom the people have cast out. Note that there is not just one wise hero but four men, a little church able to converse and correct one another. For them, disaster has already come. *Our people want us dead; staying here, we'll soon starve to death. The enemy may put us to death, too, but maybe not.* So done are they with desires of the flesh, so close in their imagination is the door of death, that they are free to act, to put hand to the latch and push. Lesson one in finding common ground in disaster: Give attention to people with no power, people hated and cast out, people feared. Why?

Because they know the path of privation. They have lived with the loss of good things, of safety, of kindness and reputation. When a person's imagination for happiness is cut off, only two options lie open: shrivel up in despair and misery, or, as the great hymn has it, "Let goods and kindred go / This mortal life also / The body they may kill / God's truth abideth still." People hated and cast out have often already learned that what they feared does not exist. Like the leprous men, they have been freed to move into an unknown space, to walk by a light from within. God knows, suffering is not a formula for getting the goods! But for those who have endured suffering, the fever of spiritual disease breaks. The four men are ready to find common ground.

In America, millions have been despised and rejected by those who dominate. Black Americans, Native Americans, queer Americans, Pride in NYC today; shout it out: disabled Americans, poor Americans, immigrants. Who can exhaust the list? This obscenely fat book of fears and hatred makes plain the spiritual law that whoever hopes the nation will be made great through material gain—superior in class or wealth or religion or skin or war—carries the spiritual disease, and will not become humane without undergoing grievous loss. Now, terrific disruptions are coming. A church can awaken to this reality—not in fear, for what you fear does not exist—but in the wisdom of loss. "You have

already died,” wrote the apostle, “and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (*Col 3.3*) That is the wisdom and the way of that little church of leprous men. When we are like them, we can help people find common ground, though nature burn and overwhelm our lives.

“So they arose at twilight to go to the Syrian camp, but when they came to the edge of it, there was no one there at all.” Ah, if what you fear does not exist! More than a century ago, Leo Tolstoy wrote: “What an immense mass of evil must result . . . from allowing men to assume the right of anticipating what may happen.” The lesson here ought not be—not by any means—that forecasting and preparation are bootless exercises. Rather, that when people let go their endless hunger for happiness by means of things, they are free to act as their precious conscience directs. To do the right thing without concern for the right outcome. The lepers find common ground quite literally: ground safe for themselves and all their city to enjoy, because having let go of fear they were able to act: “able,” as historian Howard Zinn put in his autobiography, “to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us. [This] is itself a marvelous victory.”

In the camp, the first impulse of the four is to hoard things. What a great lesson. Although we may grow spiritually, we also backslide. Unexpected circumstances can overwhelm us and tempt us to give in to lesser gods. Finding common ground also depends on our inward preparation, so that like them, we can talk truth to one another. *What we are doing is wrong*, they say. How extraordinary. Confession, the opposite of Florida, opens a new direction, because what we feared, and what prompted us to hoard, does not exist.

Sarah Kendzior is an anthropologist who studies how tyrants wield power. Generalizing from what can be seen on our screens any day, how tyrants have mastered means for manipulating fear and resentment, Kendzior writes: “To protect and wield the power [of who you truly are], you need to know yourself—right now, before their methods permeate, before you accept the obscene and unthinkable as normal.” This is the real work for a local church—not its social function, which surely matters, and certainly not ideological functions, hammering out the true beliefs—but rather inward preparation for loss, for death, and for all the dance of delight in this wonder-filling world that comes through acceptance of the life we are given.

In our story, the leprous men bring the good news to the king who of course calls it is a hoax. Haven’t we seen this guy somewhere? He trusts no one. So once again, it is a servant, one with no power, who proposes a way forward. Finding common ground hangs on giving attention to the least powerful. In this parable, it is only by their guidance that two measures of barley or a measure of choice meal are once more sold for a shekel.

That story was sort of long, and it ends well. Ours will proceed far longer, but like theirs, its character will depend on the attention given—or not given—to the despised and rejected, those made to serve. Although no description of sadness appears in the story of the four men and sadness is not the final mood in finding common ground, it is there. Sadness and lament are essential to movement toward common ground. In Jesus’ story, it is so plain. “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over

it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!'" "Sadness!" one writer observes, "of all things—sadness has the power to create the 'union between souls' that we so desperately lack." There is the ground common to all humans not shut up in denial: sadness for all creatures who suffer, and for all we have done wrong. Sadness is exactly what those laws against teaching history and climate change are meant to prevent, lest a union of souls move people to rise up to a new vision for our humanity.

Here is a vision of humanity from the last time I offered a sermon here sixteen years ago. Right at that door where I was greeting, there came last an elderly man with a walker. From under a straw hat, he lifted his clear blue eyes and thanked me. "I have been an atheist all my life and today is the first time I have heard a sermon that embraces the way I see." Then, at the luncheon, a woman sat with me. She said, "My sister joined a strict religious order a long time ago and she grew very hard and I abandoned Christianity. I haven't seen her in years. But today, with your sermon, I realized I can be a Christian again. And I will visit her." Of course the preacher felt blessed. But a blessing far greater is implied, for each of these stepped from a certain sadness into a new way of seeing. And they, I'd say, stand on the common ground which is essential to the quality of your community here in Rensselaerville. You are standing on holy ground. What you fear does not exist.