

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked.

¹⁶ "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

¹⁷ And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. 2 Kings 6:15-17

Don't Be Afraid!

What is the scariest thing that ever happened to you? I was thinking about that question this week and I had to admit that my experiences haven't been as scary as some people's have. In fact, the first thing I thought of was kind of silly. When I was in 5th or 6th grade, I went to a Halloween haunted house and got so scared that the staff had to take me out of it. It's silly because it wasn't real. There was no real danger in there at all and I knew it. So I tried to think of real situations and probably the scariest thing in my life was when our first child was born. The doctors had to do an emergency C-section. While I was waiting, I couldn't help but wonder if I was going to lose both my wife and my unborn child. What about you? If you've had to face cancer or some other life-threatening illness, if you've ever been in a car accident that felt like this was the end, if you've been the victim of a violent crime, you may have felt very real fear. This morning, by the grace of God, we're going to confirm our 8th graders. Many of them may have never had to face anything more scary than that haunted house I went through when I was just a little younger than they are. But maybe their lives have been different and they've had scarier things than that happen to them. Whatever we have already faced, whatever we face today or will face tomorrow, God's message to us this morning is: **Don't be afraid!**

I.

Now, that's an easy thing to say, but how do we live it? Why shouldn't I be afraid? Because I'm not alone. And neither are you. That is the fundamental lesson of the Scriptures for our lives in this world. For every scary day that we live here, God has a solution. **Don't be afraid! Remember who is on your side.**

Elisha's servant had to remember that truth. One morning, he got out of bed and went out to do his morning chores. He looked up and saw that the town was surrounded by an enemy army. He was terrified that he and Elisha were going to die. Why was that army there? To hunt down Elisha! You see, the king of Aram – the country we know today as Syria – was at war with Israel. He was a far more powerful king with a much stronger army than the king of Israel had. But he kept losing battles because Elisha would get information from God about where the Aramean army was and what it was doing, and then pass that intelligence on to the king of Israel. He had the best intelligence operation any country could ever have. God was never wrong about what was happening. Needless to say, the king of Aram/Syria was getting pretty frustrated. Once he understood what was happening, he sent an army to the village of Dothan to kill Elisha. That's the army that Elisha's servant woke up and found right outside their gates.

But when he asked Elisha, **"Oh, my lord, what shall we do?"** Elisha told him, **"Don't be afraid."** Clearly, Elisha wasn't afraid. So why was his servant? Well, it's a natural reaction to being in danger. Having an enemy send an army specifically to kill someone close to you is a little scary. And knowing you might just wind up being collateral damage doesn't help. Fear is the human response to threats. So why wasn't Elisha afraid? He remembered that God was with him and that God had promised to protect his people. Elisha's faith conquered his fear. Faith is trusting in God. As the confirmands learned in catechism class, it means that we trust God's promises, especially his promise to give us eternal life through Christ. Fear forgets God's promises because fear is the opposite of faith. But faith is a powerful weapon against the fear we all face.

Now, wasn't Elisha's servant a believer, too? Of course he was. So why didn't his faith conquer his fear? Because it wasn't strong enough at that moment to do the job. The reality of our lives is that fear and faith both live in our hearts at the same time. And they are not good roommates. They fight constantly. In the heart of every Christian there is what the Bible calls the Old Man or the Old Adam. That's the unbeliever that we were born with. That unbeliever has no trust in God at all. He trusts in himself. He trusts in the false gods of this world. He trusts in wealth and power and his own belief that he's smarter than anybody else. So when

scary things come and he has to face the fact that he isn't rich enough or strong enough or smart enough to get out of danger, that Old Man is terrified. Since the Old Man is you and me, we are terrified. But in the heart of every Christian there is also a New Man, a believer, who trusts absolutely and totally in Christ and all his promises. That New Man fights the Old Man. When that New Man wins – and he doesn't always – faith conquers fear. Since that New Man is you and me, too, we conquer fear.

How do we make that New Man win? By remembering who is on our side. God the Father, who loved us so much that he sent his one and only Son to die for us, God the Father who made the world and runs the world and who controlled all of history so that Jesus would be born and live and die for us and who promises to control all things for our good – God the Father is on our side. Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, who left behind the glory of heaven to be born as a real human being, who faced every threat and danger we have to face in this scary and sinful world, Jesus Christ who laid down his life and paid for our sins and then rose from the dead to conquer sin and death and hell and all that stands against us – Jesus Christ is on our side. The Holy Spirit who inspired the apostles and prophets to write the Bible, who reached into our hearts when there was no New Man there and gave us faith, the Holy Spirit who works every day through the gospel message to comfort us and strengthen us to face all that this life throws at us – the Holy Spirit is on our side.

God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are fighting for us. Through them we conquer fear. But how does that actually happen in our hearts? How does God actually strengthen the New Man so he wins the arguments with his roommate, the Old Man? By hearing the gospel, over and over again for as long as we live, especially when life is scary or painful. We hear it in church and also privately, when our pastor visits us in times of crisis and when we read it for ourselves. By coming to communion and receiving the true body and blood of Christ to strengthen and preserve us in the true faith to life everlasting. By remembering that in our baptism, God washed all our sins away and adopted us as his own children. By confessing our sins to our pastor and hearing him tell us those very sins are forgiven and gone forever. We need that gospel. You, our confirmands, will need that gospel for the rest of your lives. It reminds you who is on your side. It builds up your faith and conquers your fear.

II.

When we talk about faith conquering fear, we encounter one basic difficulty that was illustrated for me by a question someone asked me long before I became a pastor. I was in the army in Germany and I was trying to share the gospel with a friend who didn't believe. He asked me, "Have you ever seen God?" Of course, I had to say, "No." That was over thirty years ago and I still haven't seen God. God is invisible. He hides himself while we struggle through this sinful world and he calls us to trust that he is there. That seems to work to fear's advantage. An unbelieving husband taunted a Christian woman I know as he left her for another woman by asking, "Where is your God?" She couldn't point to him either. We have no promise that we will ever see him before we die or Judgment Day comes. But **don't be afraid! Not even when you can't see God.**

He is still there. Elisha understood how hard it is to trust what we can't see. So when his servant cried out in terror, Elisha said, "**Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.**" He reminded his servant that real faith is being sure of what we can't see: God is on our side. He does not leave us alone twisting in the wind when the devil and all his followers in this life attack us. God's power to strengthen our faith is in that gospel promise. To show us that God's power is real, at Elisha's prayer, God opened the servant's eyes so that he could see spiritual realities that are usually hidden: the hills were full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. They were full of angels. Apparently, there were more angels than enemy soldiers, which was really kind of overkill, since one single angel has enough power to halt a human army. But God wanted the servant's faith to conquer his fear. Now, God does not promise to let us see the angels that are around us. God wants us to trust his promise, to trust what we can't see. But he did show them to this servant so that we would understand that they are there.

That matters because we often feel outnumbered. Even though the majority of Americans call themselves Christians, it does not feel like the majority of people hold to what I've taught you in catechism class. I've taught you that God instituted marriage as a lifelong union of one man and one woman. Outside that union, all sex is sinful. I've taught you that abortion and mercy killing are murder. I've taught you that your parents are God's representatives, and much, much more. I've taught you those things because that's what God's Word says. But our society says something different. It says that marriage should include gay unions, that divorce is a good thing if two people don't love each other anymore, that sex is a normal part of dating.

The world insists that a woman has a right to terminate a pregnancy because that's not a baby, it's a fetus and if someone is in pain they have right to end their own life. The world looks at parents as part of the problem if they would dare to spank you when you sin. Certainly, they can't tell you what is right or wrong for you.

You know what? It's scary to speak out against those attitudes. Anyone who does is labeled as a bigot and you can lose your job for stuff like that today. You certainly will pay a price in the way people speak about you and treat you. Fear silences us. Worse, we wonder how we will ever hold onto the truth. How will our children and our grandchildren hold on to the truth? How much worse is it going to get?

It's hard to see God in our world today. But he is still there. The angels are still there. Every day, the gospel does the work God sent it to do. It found us. It gave us faith. It claimed these confirmands and made them God's own children. That gospel will continue to strengthen and support you through this life. Now, it is true that we may pay a price for confessing our faith. The confirmands will promise today to suffer death and all rather than fall away from the truth. But God will give them the strength to keep that promise. God will conquer their fear and be with them, even when it looks like the world has won. We cannot lose. If we die, we stand with Christ in heaven. If we live, our Lord stands with us here. He will protect us. He will preserve us in the faith. That is his promise.

That is the hope of these young people today. Confirmation is not graduation from catechism class. Confirmation is not a rite of passage or a traditional ceremony. Confirmation is a confession of faith in Christ and a promise to God to be faithful to him. These young people – you young people – can make that confession and that promise because God has given you that faith. He will feed it and strengthen it. He will give you courage when life is terrifying. And he will bring you home to live with him in joy and peace and without fear forever. Amen