

With the Eyes of Faith
(2 Kings 6:8-17, Romans 12:1-8)

A Sunday School teacher challenged the children in her class to set aside some time that very afternoon and use it to write a letter to God. They were to bring back the letter the following Sunday and read it to the class. The next week they all came back, letters in hand. This is what one of them wrote. "Dear God, we had a good time at church today. Wish you could have been there." Was God really absent that Sunday morning at church? Or was the little boy just not able to sense God's presence? Both of the Bible passages I chose for this morning make the point that the most important thing that we have in this life may not be what we see, but what we do not see. To put it another way, the most important things we can have is the gift of looking at the world through the eyes of faith and seeing in the world the powerful and loving presence of God.

I love this story from the Old Testament about the confrontation of the prophet Elisha and the king of Syria. Syria was one of Israel's constant and determined enemies. At the time spoken of in the account, they were trying to gain military victory over Israel. Syria's army commander would plot an ambush against Israel's army. But, every time the trap was laid, the people of Israel never showed up to be beaten. The commander begins to wonder if there isn't a spy in his organization who is leaking information to the enemy. Well, there was no spy. It was the prophet Elisha, who warned the king of Israel every time to go another way. So the king of Syria finds out that Elisha is staying in a town called Dothan. The king surrounds it with thousands of warriors and chariots and horse. In the morning, when Elisha's servant looks out, all he can see is death and destruction. Everywhere he looks he sees only the horses and chariots of Syria's army, ready and waiting to attack. "We are doomed, sir," he says. "Don't worry," says Elisha, "we will prevail." The servant replies, "You and I and what army?" Then Elisha prays, "O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!" God answers Elisha's prayer. When the servant looks up, he sees that the hillside is covered with horses and chariots of fire, all around Elisha.

What is it that you see when you look a beach filled with sand? Maybe you see worthless quartz, broken into little bits. Look at it through different eyes and you might see the memory for a million computers. If you are the Psalmist you will be reminded of the thoughts of God, which are so many that you cannot begin to count them.

In Northern Michigan, there are lots of wetlands. To some they seem like worthless ground that no one can build upon, filled with grass, weeds, dirty, wet, boggy soil. But if you stand in the middle of the River Jordan, which runs there, you will realize that they are a vast natural filter which takes the water and makes it clean and pure.

William Blake wrote that most people, when they look at the sun, see a round yellow object about the size of a guinea. When I look at it, he wrote, I see a thousand angels praising God. It makes all the difference in the world how we look at ourselves and the world we live in.

It is not unusual for a young boy to look into the mirror as he gets ready for school. Looking back at him he sees a face plagued with acne. He sees a face that is too round, or too angular. The eyes are not the right color, the hair is not what he would like. Why isn't Tom Cruise or Keanna Reeves staring back at him? He may even find it difficult to believe that anyone could ever love him. He may even feel betrayed. If

he looks again he will see a person that God created, that God loves more than he loves himself.

Elisha's servant looked out at the world and saw only disaster. But when God opened his eyes he saw the hillsides covered with the glory of God.

The story of Elisha and the army of Syria speaks to me about the ever present grace and power of God. God has filled our lives and our world with good things, the best of all being God's gracious and powerful presence. God's love is the reality of our lives. Our scripture from the Old Testament speaks of that reality. The scripture from Romans speaks about our response to God's love.

Twenty seven years ago, when I was pastor of a small church in New Albany, Indiana I remember looking through the American Bible Society catalogue. I was not married at this time, but still single. The catalogue listed scripture pamphlets. Each had on the front a color picture and on the inside a scripture to go along with the picture. On one there was the picture of the face of a pretty girl. She had long brown hair and big brown eyes. Inside was the Phillips translation from Romans 12. "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you my brothers (and sisters), as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable to him." With eyes wide open to the mercies of God.

Other translations say "which is your spiritual worship." People often think that worship, especially spiritual worship, is the very opposite of flesh. Worship is spiritual. Spiritual is here – our bodies are here. Yet in this very passage God says that our spiritual worship is to present our bodies. Before Martin Luther banged a list of topics for debate on the door of a church in Wittenburg, people thought there were spiritual people, like priests, and the rest of us. But with the Reformation came an understanding that every person has a vocation. Our lives, and the work that we do, be it as a life guard at a beach, an air traffic controller, a mechanic at a garage or a minister in the pulpit are all spiritual work that God calls us to do for God's glory and kingdom. Car repair, shipping clerk, truck routing, truck driving, computer programming, nursing, hair care, teaching. Look at them through one set of eyes and they are a job. Something you do to put bread on the table. Look at them with eyes wide open to the mercies of God and the ability and opportunity to work are a gift from God, and the careful work is a gift given to God, a vocation, a calling. Sometimes people define their profession by defining it as Christian. A Christian counselor, a Christian doctor, a Christian architect. I'm never sure how to take that. One hand that may mean that this person had taken every activity, thought and attitude and put everyone into a category of right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or not acceptable. You can be sure that if you go there they will try to straighten out your priorities and get your life on the right track. On the other hand it may mean that this person sees their lives and their talents as gifts from God, that they understand that in all they do, God is present, and that whatever road they go down, they know Christ goes down it with them. They come with openness and creativity and love, seeking to bring healing and beauty, and strength into all that they do. They approach their work and their world with eyes wide open to the mercies of God. They see the horses and chariots of fire, they see a thousand angels singing praise to God, they sense God's present help, whether in the pain of their crosses or in the glory of their transfigurations. And they see themselves as God's beloved children. They bring themselves and their gifts not in payment for a future hope, but as their response to a present good. Everything that I have seen of you, Marie, indicates that you see God's world and your life through eyes of faith.

Even so, there will be times when you will be surrounded by hostile forces. All of us have those times in our lives. I am guessing and hoping that they will not be not be real soldiers with guns aimed to kill. More likely they will be two papers to finish in one week. Professors who are hostile or obtuse. Bosses who seem to delight in pointing out weaknesses. They may be failures, snubs, disappointments, friends that die, jobs that don't pan out, successes that threaten to go to your head. At times you may be your worst enemy, although that is very difficult for me to imagine, making mistakes or forgetting important things. At other times there will be no troubles to be found anywhere. I hope and wish for you in all of it that you will have eyes of faith, open to see God's presence. The Apostle Paul had been through shipwrecks, beatings and was near the end of his life, living in a roman prison cell. From there he wrote, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, angels nor principalities, messengers of heaven or messengers of hell. Nothing in this life or in the life to come, no dark secret from my past not secret calamity in the future can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." I do not wish for you these kinds of bigger than life hardships and struggles. I don't expect that you will have those kinds of struggles. do you? What I do hope, for you, and for all of those who will graduate with you and for all of us gathered today is that God will open your eyes and ours to see his presence and care surrounding you in everything that you do, that you can have that conviction that nothing can separate you from the joy of God's presence, and that as a response, your lives will be an offering of love.