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Four lepers and an abandoned camp. God is love.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings 7 But Elisha said, Hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the LORD, Tomorrow about this time a seer of fine flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two seers of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria. Then the captain on whose hand the king leaned said to the man of God, If the LORD himself should make windows in heaven, could this thing be? But he said, You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat of it.

Now there were four men who were lepers at the entrance to the gate, and they said to one another, Why are we sitting here until we die? If we say, Let us enter the city, the famine is in the city, and we shall die there. And if we sit here, we die also. So now come, let us go over to the camp of the Syrians.

If they spare our lives, we shall live, and if they kill us, we shall but die. So they arose at twilight to go to the camp of the Syrians. But when they came to the edge of the camp of the Syrians, behold, there was no one there.

For the LORD had made the army of the Syrians hear the sound of chariots and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to come against us. So they fled away in the twilight, and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys, leaving the camp as it was, and fled for their lives. And when these lepers came to the edge of the camp, they went into a tent and ate and drank, and they carried off silver and gold and clothing, and went and hid them.

Then they came back and entered another tent and carried off things from it, and went and hid them. Then they said to one another, We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news.

If we are silent and wait until the morning light, punishment will overtake us. Now therefore come, let us go and tell the king's household. So they came and called to the gatekeepers of the city and told them, We came to the camp of the Syrians, and behold, there was no one to be seen or heard there, nothing but the horses tied and the donkeys tied, and the tents as they were.

Then the gatekeepers called out, and it was told within the king's household. And the king rose in the night and said to his servants, I will tell you what the Syrians have done to us. They know that we are hungry.

Therefore they have gone out of the camp to hide themselves in the open country, thinking, when they come out of the city, we shall take them alive and get into the city. And one of his servants said, Let some men take five of the remaining horses, seeing that those who are left here will fare like the whole multitude of Israel who have already perished. Let us send and see.

So they took two horsemen, and the king sent them after the army of the Syrians, saying, Go and see. So they went after them as far as the Jordan, and behold, all the way was littered with garments and equipment that the Syrians had thrown away in their haste. And the messengers returned and told the king.

Then the people went out and plundered the camp of the Syrians. So a seer of fine flour was sold for a shekel, and two seers of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the lord. Now the king had appointed the captain on whose hand he leaned to have charge of the gate.

And the people trampled him in the gate, so that he died, as the man of God had said when the king came down to him. For when the man of God had said to the king, Two seers of barley shall be sold for a shekel, and a seer of fine flour for a shekel, about this time tomorrow in the gate of Samaria, the captain had answered the man of God, If the lord himself should make windows in heaven, could such a thing be? And he had said, You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat of it. And so it happened to

him, for the people trampled him in the gate, and he died.

In the story of 2 Kings chapter 6 verses 8-23, where the Syrians had tried to capture Elisha in Dothan, the story had begun with an attack from the Syrians, from which the lord miraculously delivered his people, concluding with the provision of a great feast and the departure of the Syrians. Albeit in a rather different manner, the same pattern plays out again here in chapter 7. Perhaps this invites comparisons and contrasts between the two accounts, as narratives designed to be read alongside of each other. As Peter Lightheart notes, the whole narrative is chiasmically structured, as a there and back again story.

It begins with Elisha's prediction to the officer in verses 1-2, and ends with the fulfilment of that prediction in verses 16-20. It then has the four leprous men discovering the abandoned camp in verses 3-8, which corresponds with the return of the messengers of the king in verse 15. The lepers return to report the empty camp in verses 9-11, and the messengers of the king are sent out in verses 14-15.

At the centre of the pattern are verses 12-13, in which the king expresses his suspicions concerning a trap set by the Syrians, and one of his men suggests that they send out some horses and some men with them to discover whether a trap indeed had been set. Chapter 6 ended with the king coming against Elisha, whom he blamed for the horrific crisis of the siege and the famine that had befallen Samaria. Now, as the king comes to Elisha's door, Elisha responds to him.

Elisha's prophecy is astonishing. Samaria's famine isn't merely the result of the siege, as can be seen in the following chapter. It's gone on for several years.

To claim that the lord would provide such a quantity of food that the people of Samaria would almost instantly go from selling a donkey's head for 80 shekels of silver and a small quantity of dove's dung for 5 shekels of silver, to a situation where barley and fine flour would be so cheaply obtained, was difficult to countenance. A famine does not instantly lift. In this respect, it isn't like a drought, where the coming of rains can change the situation in a matter of hours.

Rather, access to food takes some time to be restored after a famine. Food has to be grown, harvested, brought to the people and then sold to them. Each of these stages takes time, a lot longer than a day.

The sudden end to the famine reminds us of the sudden end to the drought in the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18. Once again, the power of the word of the lord would be demonstrated to a resistant Umid king. The captain who accompanied the king refused to believe it and he expressed his disbelief, to which Elisha responded with a word of judgement, which would also serve as a further confirmation of the word of the lord concerning the event.

We don't see many lepers in the narrative of the Old Testament, but there are a cluster of lepers in these chapters, namely the Syrian, Gehazi the servant of Elisha and the four lepers of this chapter. The lepers, on account of their uncleanness, were excluded from the city, although there is some irony in this fact, when we consider that the people within the city were eating donkey's heads, dove's dung and even their own children. The lepers are outsiders, the people excluded from the community, but they will be the first to enjoy the fruit of the lord's deliverance and they become the bearers of the good news.

The lepers, excluded from the beleaguered city, decide that they have nothing to lose by going to the camp of the Syrians in search of food. However, when they go there, there is no one to be found. In the previous story, the lord had confused the eyes of the Syrians so that they could not recognise Elisha or where they were.

In this story, we discover that the lord had deceived the ears of the Syrians so that they heard the sound of chariots, horses and a great army, causing them to flee. In discussing the structure of the books of the kings, Lighthouse and James Jordan observe that the events of chapter 6 verse 24 to chapter 7 verse 20 are parallel to the earlier story of chapter 3 concerning the battle against the Moabites. Lighthouse writes, He also goes into thinking that the three kings have slaughtered each other in chapter 3 verses 21 to 24 and he tricks the Arameans in the opposite way by chasing them away from their camp so that Israel can plunder them in chapter 7 verses 6 to 7. The two chapters are chiasmatically linked and are neatly inverted.

In one, an army leaves a city expecting to find an empty camp and is surprised to find an army. In the second, lepers leave a city expecting to find a full camp and are surprised to find an empty camp. In both stories too, Elisha prophesies miraculous provision of water in chapter 3 verse 17 and food in chapter 7 verse 1. The lepers arrive at the camp at twilight and the Syrians flee the camp in the twilight.

The implication might be that they flee before the lepers. They believe that the sound they hear must be the sound of the kings of the Hittites and the Egyptians and they presume that Israel has hired them against them. In his commentary on the book, Ian Provan notes that there is a strong pun on the word for lepers, Mitzrayim, and the word for Egyptians, Mitsrayim.

Once again, the involvement of the Lord in the situation is comic in character. The pun gives weight to the suggestion that the Syrians are mistaking the lepers for the first of the Egyptians and fleeing before four outcasts scavenging for food. On the other hand, in the previous account of the Syrians trying to capture Elisha and Dothan, the city had been surrounded by invisible chariots and horses of the Lord and now the city of Samaria is delivered by an invisible yet audible army of chariots and horses.

Israel's forces look beleaguered but they have a far greater force surrounding them. In

Psalm 34 verse 7 we read, The lepers initially behave like Achan. They hide the spoil but they rightly think better of their actions and determine to go back to the city and deliver the news.

They inform the gatekeepers of Samaria, telling them about the empty camp and the gatekeepers pass on the news to the king's household. The king, hearing the news, is wary that the Syrians have set a trap, which they will spring as soon as the men of Samaria leave the city. They decide that they will act cautiously, so they send out a few men and horses to scout out the camp.

Besides, what do they have to lose if they die at the hand of the Syrians, rather than dying in the city like everyone else? When they seek to follow the path of the Syrian army, however, they discover that the way was littered with abandoned clothes and equipment, which they had abandoned in their haste. In the conclusion of the chapter we see that the word of the Lord by Elisha was fulfilled, a prophecy that was beyond remarkable when it was first delivered. Due to the disbelief of the captain, Elisha had given him a word of judgement and this was also fulfilled.

His failure to believe the word and the power of the Lord meant that he tragically missed out on the Lord's deliverance. A question to consider. This story, like the story that preceded it, is a story of the Lord confusing his enemies, frustrating their violent intentions, and giving a feast or a gift of plenty.

How might these examples of the Lord's dealing with his people and their enemies anticipate the events of the gospel? Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testified that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God.

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.

If anyone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, whoever loves God must also love his brother. John has already argued that love for each other necessarily accompanies being born of God.

Now, in the latter half of 1 John 4, he will make another argument for the importance of love from a somewhat different angle of approach. He now focuses upon the fact that love is from God, and that God is love. Love is not merely some secondary created reality.

It finds its source in God himself. If the devil is the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning, one who seeks to destroy, God is the one from whom love comes. Hence it manifests the spiritual paternity of all who love in truth, as they act in a way that reflects God's own character.

Anyone who does not love cannot have been born of God, because they bear no resemblance to his character. Love is a theological reality. John has previously affirmed in 1 John 5 that God is light.

Now he affirms that God is love. God doesn't possess qualities in the way that we do as created beings. God is identical to his attributes.

God doesn't just happen to be loving. He is love. This is an important theological statement.

This should not be reversed to say that love is God, as our society is often inclined to do. Nor should we think that love is whatever we feel love to be. By declaring that love is rooted in God, John challenges our belief that love is a human measure by which all things can be assessed according to us.

Rather, if we want to know what love really is, we shouldn't look in our own hearts, which are deceitful and twisted, but should look to God instead. By declaring that God is love, we discover that, in its home country, as it were, love is neither a feeling nor an abstraction. Love is God's very personal nature and existence.

We will learn what love is as we learn who God is. There is no true understanding of love for which the love of God is not the North Star. And what love is has been manifested to us because God has revealed his love to us in Christ.

The revelation of love isn't found in our love for God, but in God's astounding love for us, in his sending of his own Son to be the propitiation for our sins. This theologically grounded love should spur us to love each other. No one has seen God.

This is a point that John also makes in John's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 18. No one has ever seen God. The only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

The eternal word of God, Jesus Christ, has manifested God to us in his incarnation. However, God is also known to us in the outworking of the love that he has placed within us in our love for others. In our loving of others, we come to know his love in us.

John once again turns here to the issue of assurance. We know that we abide in God and that he abides in us because he has communicated his love to us by his Spirit that he has given to us. As we walk in the love of the Spirit, we will be assured of sonship, knowing assurance through our experience.

And as the Spirit bears witness to the Son, so the Spirit, in addition to leading us in the way of God's love, in which we know assurance of sonship, leads us to confess Jesus as the Son of God, the one that the Father sent to be the Saviour of the world. The Spirit causes us both to look outside of ourselves to Christ and gives us an assurance within as we look to God's revelation of love in his Son and walk in his footsteps. God's love shouldn't just be an abstract thing in our understanding.

It is a love for us and we should know it as such. Love is a two-way, mutual thing. It is God's love for us and it is our answering love that he has produced in us by his Spirit.

Our love feeds upon the knowledge of his love and this is the way by which love is perfected. This gives us assurance and confidence as we face judgement. We know that we do not belong to the world but that we are sons of God in Christ, those who are being conformed to his character by the Holy Spirit which he has given to us.

Here we might recall Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, verses 14-26. And for their sake I consecrate myself that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them, and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me, and love them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me.

I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. In these statements from Jesus' high priestly prayer in John chapter 17, we see something of the meaning of the words, As he is, so also are we in the world, being unpacked. The perfection of love in us, as it develops from our assurance of God's own love for us, casts out fear, and the terror and apprehension with which we might otherwise relate to God.

We know God as a loving Father, and so are no longer afraid of Him in the way that those who do not know His love are. Fear cowers before the threat of punishment, but as we grow in love we fulfil the great commandment of God, the commandment that sums up all other commandments, and our hearts are set at rest. True love finds its starting point in God.

God's love comes first, before our love for Him. Our love is an answering love, a love that is learned through the experience of God's love for us. However, love for God has, as its necessary companion, love for neighbour.

The person who hates his neighbour lies when he claims to love God. Indeed, it is our love for the brothers that our love for God can be most powerfully seen in. In the Gospels, Jesus declares that the law can be summed up in two commandments, in Matthew 22, verses 35-40.

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. In 1 John 4, verse 21, we see that these two commandments are inseparable, and that the second follows naturally from the first.

And this commandment we have from Him, whoever loves God must also love his brother. The first commandment and the second commandment are two sides of the same coin. A question to consider.

What other statements in Scripture of the form God is love can you think of? What do such statements teach us about God?