

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Someone Else’s Good News”

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2 Kings 11:17-12:2

November 19, 2023

We’re in the second to last week of this series looking at the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha, so first a note on what is coming next. Obviously we’re close to Thanksgiving, and with Thanksgiving comes another holiday right around the corner. After we wrap up this series on Elisha next week, we begin the season of Advent, and this year as a church we’ll be looking at this season anticipating Christ through the lens of a few figures that are often over to the side: the Magi, commonly known as the wise men.

The liturgically minded among us are crying foul right now, thinking, “You can’t talk about the Magi during Advent! They don’t even belong there at Christmas!” We’ll get to that, but how many of us have spent a lifetime looking for something, in the stars, in your lives, you name it? What could Christmas look like if something actually lived up to its billing? We’ll start that in two weeks.

This week, the lens broadens a bit, out of the particular sphere of Elisha and the northern kingdom of Israel and into the similarly chaotic and ruthless world of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah, drawing questions of just how God may be at work beyond what we ourselves are doing. Let’s go to God’s Word together. **2 Kings 11:17-12:2**

Jehoiada made a covenant between the Lord and the king and people, that they should be the Lord’s people; also between the king and the people. Then all the people of the land went to the house of Baal and tore it down; his altars and his images they broke in pieces, and they killed Mattan, the priest of Baal, in front of the altars. The priest posted guards over the house of the Lord. He took the captains, the Carites, the guards, and all the people of the land; then they brought the king down from the house of the Lord, marching through the gate of the guards to the king’s house. He took his seat on the throne of the kings. So all the people of the land rejoiced, and the city was quiet after Athaliah had been killed with the sword at the king’s house.

Jehoash was seven years old when he began to reign.

In the seventh year of Jehu, Jehoash began to reign; he reigned forty years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Zibiah of Beer-sheba. Jehoash did what was

right in the sight of the Lord all his days because the priest Jehoiada instructed him.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy God, we praise you for in your grace and power through your Son Christ Jesus the Lord, you are ushering in a new kingdom, inaugurating the reconciliation and renewal of the world. We pray for that renewal among us and within this day, and we pray for it among those we do not know, through those you have lifted up as your witnesses. Guide us to give thanks and praise for all the ways you may be at work within the world, and help us to see them and rejoice in all the ways your Word is bearing fruit. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I wonder if Elisha was an envious man. Could a prophet be envious of another prophet? As in, well God did this thing through me over here, but God did that thing through that prophet over there. Why didn't God do that thing through me?

The reason I wonder that is because right in the middle of all of these stories about Elisha and his prophetic ministry in Israel, it's as if the story picks up shop and moves south to the southern kingdom of Judah. And it tells of a revival of sorts led by the rise of a young king (just a boy, really) named Joash.

It started with the death of the king; a guy named Ahaziah. Killed by none other than Jehu—y'all remember him? That was the guy Elisha anointed (by proxy, at least) to be king in Israel. Turned out to be a pretty ruthless and bloodthirsty king. He was supposed to end a wicked dynasty in Israel, which he did. But then he got a bit overzealous. He killed way more people than he was supposed to, including the southern king of Judah, Ahaziah.

Right now all the names might be swirling around, and you're thinking, "Hold on, how is there more than one king?" Main thing to remember is that what was once the united kingdom of Israel (like it was with kings you might have heard of named Saul and David and Solomon) is now the divided kingdom of Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Important to note that the southern kingdom of Judah also included Jerusalem, the temple, and the line of David.

But it can get confusing because in the Book of Kings, it tries to tell the story of both the northern and southern kingdoms at the same time, so it spends a bit of time on one side, then it'll switch to spend a bit of time on the southern side, and it'll say things like it does at the beginning of chapter 12: "In the seventh year of Jehu, Joash began to reign." That means, in the seventh year of the northern king Jehu, the reign of this new king Joash began in the south.

And the way that this new king Joash rose to the throne started with the northern king Jehu killing his father Ahaziah.

Now you would think that when the king dies, the crown would go to his son, but not the case. Ahaziah's mother, named Athaliah, decides she would like to rule. So she sets out to kill the rest of the royal family and take power for herself. And yes, that includes her grandson Joash, just one year old at the time. This is nasty stuff, folks, so maybe we remember that at the Thanksgiving table this week when that relative brings up that awkward topic about politics again and folks start arguing and you think, "My family is just the worst." Well, could be worse.

Athaliah sets out to kill the entire royal family, including her young grandson Joash, and she would've succeeded if not for Joash's aunt, who hides him away in the temple under the care and guard of a priest named Jehoiada. And for six years, the child is raised in the temple. Then after six years, Athaliah is killed, and young Joash, now seven years old, begins to rule in Jerusalem.

That's where today's text picks up, with Jehoiada the priest establishing a covenant with the young king Joash. There's a revival in the land of Judah. Idolatry is stamped out. People rose up and stamped out the worship of Baal, and as it tells us in the twelfth chapter, the long rule of a faithful king began, as "Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord all his days."

I offer all that backstory because it's important to note that this revival didn't pop out of a nowhere. The relationship between the king Joash and the priest Jehoiada is crucial in bringing this about. Think about it, a priest charged with a young king's safekeeping after his entire family is killed, by his grandmother no less, and so he raises the boy in the temple, and instills a faithfulness in him that leads to the revival of faith throughout the land once he takes the throne.

It's a compelling story. Finally, a good and faithful king rises and leads the people to a renewed faith and rules for a long time. You don't get many of those in this book. This is awesome.

But as we've been going along you might've noted one thing missing: where's Elisha in all this? I thought this was supposed to be a series about Elisha. Where is he? Presumably he's still doing his thing up in Israel, but in this story of a revival, this long-awaited revival in the land of Judah, in the city of God, this prophet who has been the focus of the last nine chapters is nowhere to be found.

Which makes me wonder if Elisha could be an envious man? I wonder what this whole sequence of events would have been like for Elisha to learn about? For surely, he would've heard about it. A boy king, saved from the slaughter, hidden away from his grandmother, sheltered in the temple by a priest. Then six years later that priest guides the boy king to the throne and establishes a new covenant with him and the people of God, leading to decades of faithful rule.

If I'm Elisha and I hear that story, I'd start wondering, "Why can't that sort of thing happen up here?" I mean remember what he saw. Just as the priest Jehoiada nurtured and guarded the boy

Joash and saw him restored to the throne, Elisha had his guy too. He had anointed Jehu, and yeah there were some good things that happened, but all in all, his rule was not a good one. So I wonder if he would hear about everything that happened with Joash—and he was alive for most if not all of Joash’s forty year reign—and then wonder, “Why can’t that sort of thing happen up here? Why isn’t God doing that up here? Is there something that priest down there is doing that I’m not doing? Does God favor him more than me? Why is his guy down there so much more faithful than my guy up here? Why am I not seeing the kind of fruit here that they’re seeing down there?”

Was Elisha an envious man? No indication of it, but you put many of us in the same position, would we be envious?

Think about it. Can envy seep even into something as grand as pure as the mission of God?

We all know that the correct answer is “Well, it’s not supposed to. Same team and all that.” But in practice, how easy is it for one disciple to be envious of another, for one group to be envious of another, for one church to be envious of another?

I remember back in Memphis getting to know some folks, some friends, who were a part of a new church plant in the midtown area. Memphis, like many places, would always seem to have the hot new church, but then another church would become the hot new church and so on. But just about right when I got there, this new church plant was all anyone could talk about. It was a ministry that seemed to engage the unchurched and the de-churched effectively. There was substance and renewal and transformation in people’s lives taking place. I had my qualms about some of their beliefs, but it was apparent something was at work there.

And I was envious of it. Why was God doing that over there? Why isn’t God doing that here? Is there something that pastor over there is doing that I’m not doing? Does God favor him more than me? Why am I not seeing the kind of fruit here that they’re seeing over there? I envied what I was hearing God was doing there.

How easy is it for us to get sucked into that spiral of envy? For us to look upon other disciples of Christ with resentment as to how God may be at work through them. Part of it is because we’re somewhat conditioned to. We swim so much in a survival-of-the-fittest free market sort of environment—and don’t get me wrong, this isn’t a call for the end of capitalism—but we swim in it so much that we can think it can and should apply to the church, meaning we can get tricked into considering other churches, other pastors, other things God is powerfully doing as the competition.

Think about it. This is especially true among more established congregations. Painting with a broad brush, your typical more established congregation tends not to be as effective in engaging those who are unchurched or de-churched. Now that’s a whole other topic as to why that *shouldn’t*

be the case, but nevertheless it is the case. As a result, if a more established congregation grows, that is, gains new members, they tend to come from either children being born in the church or by people switching membership from another church—whether by relocation or just switching within town.

Now to a degree, that's just how it works sometimes, and sometimes an individual's spiritual walk with the Lord leads them to a different place of worship, but on a broad scale, if a church tends only to gain members by someone switching from another church, then for that church to grow—which tends to be a desired outcome—it means another church has to shrink. And that means, even if it's not stated outright, other churches are the competition, competition for a greater and greater share of a limited pool of people and, when it comes down to it, their dollars.

Now no one's going to come out and say it like that, but in practice, that's often how it looks. If the shape of a church's ministry tends only to appeal to those who have grown up in the church or to those who are already familiar with it, as opposed to those who aren't here yet, then it's as if the church is saying, "Yeah, our target audience, in the name of bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, is members of other churches."

And that, friends, is absolutely toxic stuff. I mean how selfish was it of me to be envious of that other church in midtown Memphis? To think that God was only supposed to bring about an amazing thing through me and through my church. Not through them over there, but through us over here.

But how different would it look, if we heard someone else's good news and rejoiced?

I wonder what would've happened in Elisha and that priest Jehoiada ever crossed paths. No indication that ever happened, but who knows? Maybe they'd trade stories of challenges and joys, successes and letdowns. Maybe they'd glean wisdom, one from another, of how they could better serve the Lord in their own contexts. Would there be suspicion between them as to the faithfulness of one toward another? Or would there be thanksgiving that God was at work in mighty ways through both of them without comparison or envy?

A few years later, as far as that new church in midtown Memphis, sadly just as that congregation was beginning to get its feet under it—that's a big challenge for any church plant—there was a moral failure within the leadership. The founding pastor left, and the congregation crumbled down to just a remnant of what it had been. It was no longer the hot new church in town.

And when that happened, I remember some of the friends of mine who used to be a part of it sharing with me their own envy that it seemed like the whole thing crumbled once one person

was removed, that there wasn't stability. And they knew how I would share about my old church, of the steadiness and stability and faithfulness within the congregation, and they would wonder, "Why can't God do that over here?"

Instead of envy, friends, a crucial part of being a part of the mission of God is recognizing that we have only a small role to play, that God's work is beyond the scope and scale of any one person, of any one ministry, of any one church, of any one denomination. And as it seems Elisha did for those decades in Israel, all while there was this revival going on in Judah, we have only to be faithful, faithfully doing as the Lord would call us to do. And when it comes to someone else's good news, whether it's another church, another class, another small group, another mission, another ministry, another teacher, another preacher, let us rejoice for the renewal God is sewing there and know that we are part of the same mission.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.