

SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: A Gracious Vessel”

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2 Kings 6:8-23; Matthew 9:27-31

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During the last three weeks, Karen and I have been hearing and seeing terribly troubling news of war in and around the areas of the Holy Land. I’m sure many others have been confused and concerned, too. It’s so complex. It’s certainly an area that’s been consistently war-torn for a long time. This is the same geographical place of our Old Testament lessons during October. Our sermon series out of the book of 2 Kings has been planned for a year, but God providentially made it very relevant.

The time period of 2 Kings is about 800 years before Jesus. Jerusalem had been conquered by invaders. The time of this is often referred to as the “divided kingdom.” There were two warrior kings: King Jeroboam I, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, and King David of Judah. Jeroboam and David are often contrasted based upon how they handled war and conflict. Jeroboam for idolatry, David for righteousness and justice.

To show God’s care and sovereign leadership for his beloved children during this time, God uses the prophet Elijah, then his successor, Elisha. God utilizes Elisha to be a part of several miracles. In one of them, Elisha resurrects a boy, the son of a Shulamite woman, which helps us understand that the Church’s mission is a two-way street. It’s based upon relationship over distancing/ just sending a check. The Church’s ministry needs to be relational, not transactional. And, last week’s sermon noted that our missional outreach needs to involve extending God’s mercy.

In today’s reading of 2 Kings 6:8-23, God continues showing welfare to his faithful ones. This passage is about people at war with Israel. About Elisha’s deliverance from attackers. About God using Elisha to thwart the Arameans with blindness.

⁸“Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers. He said, “At such and such a place shall be my camp.” ⁹But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, “Take care not to pass this place, because the Arameans are going down there.” ¹⁰The king of Israel sent word to the place of which the man of God spoke. More than once or twice he warned a place so that it was on the alert. ¹¹The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this; he called his officers and said to them, “Now tell me: Who among us is betraying us to the king of Israel?”

¹² Then one of his officers said, “No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber.” ¹³ The King of Aram said, “Go and find where Elisha is; I will send and seize him.” He was told, “Elisha is in Dothan.” ¹⁴ So the king sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night and surrounded the city. ¹⁵ When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, “Alas, master! What shall we do?” ¹⁶ Elisha replied, “Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.” ¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed, “O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So, the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. ¹⁸ When the Arameans came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, “Strike this people, please, with blindness.” So, the Lord struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked. ¹⁹ Elisha said to the Arameans, “This is not the way, and this is not the city; follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.” And Elisha led them to Samaria. ²⁰ As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, “O LORD, open the eyes of these men so that they may see.” The LORD opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria. ²¹ When the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, “Father, shall I strike them? Shall I strike them?” ²² Elisha answered, “No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink, and let them go to their master.” ²³ So he prepared for the Arameans a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Prayer: Lord, we can hardly imagine such mercy and peace- in areas of war. Sometimes it’s even hard to have peace in our own lives, but you can do all things. May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen

This Elisha story tells of God’s compassionate character and of gracious human interactions that emulate God’s ways. God invites us into better living as we discern how to be: a church family, community members, and citizens of this broken world. This passage has a lot going on, so let’s first summarize 2 Kings 6. The Arameans/Syrians are attacking Israel. They are a country directly north of Israel; about 7 times larger geographically. The king is militarily frustrated and blames Elisha for getting in the way of invading Israel. Still, the king invades with military forces. Elisha reassures his servant saying, “Don’t be afraid. There are more with us than there are with them.” Elisha prays for God to open the eyes of his servant. God does and he sees supernatural military along the surrounding mountains protecting him and Elisha.

Then, Elisha prays that God temporarily blind the enemy’s eyes. Elisha then redirects them to Samaria (away from Israel). When Elisha guides them to this other place, Elisha prays, again, and God opens the enemy’s eyes, so they see they’ve been re-directed.

The king of Israel now has them as prisoners of war. Israel's king asks Elisha, "Should I kill them?" In a reversal of what might be the world's response, Elisha replies, no, "set food and water before them so they may eat and drink, and let them go." In a sign of welfare and humanitarian compassion, as well as a counter to the world's ways, the king of Israel shows mercy. With great relief and sign of peacekeeping, the enemy inspirationally "no longer came raiding into the land of Israel."

Lots of relatability. It's not a stretch to imagine the countries we hear about in the Bible because they're constantly blasted all across TV, radio, social media, and all forms of news these days. We're all crying out, "Have mercy, Son of David!"

I'm sure you're like me, thankful that in this this Biblical narrative, Elisha and Israel chose mercy over retaliation. God, with supernatural events, transforms the aggressive warriors. They learned, like we learn today, that when we encounter God, we don't leave empty; rather full! The last verse, v. 23, notes the hostilities among neighboring countries wonderfully dissipates. Peace is brought on by God and his agent of mercy.

Do you see that our compassionate God can bring about hope, where there seems to be no hope? Do you see that God thwarted the terrorist who went back home and didn't attach again? Do you see how God uses people like me and you- to show grace?

Let's be realistic, sometimes we don't see. We are blind to what God is up to. Like the hymn says, "*Immortal, Invisible God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes...*" We can be blind for many reasons. Sometimes God doesn't want us to see things (for our own good) so we don't. Sometimes we aren't looking for God, as much as ways that benefit us or ours. Sometimes we miss God because our focus is on earthly things instead of heavenly things. Sometimes we are blind because we're surrounding ourselves with so many other distractions that we can't see through the fog to make out ways of good. And, sometimes, when we are physically blind or our vision are compromised, that doesn't mean that we can't see God.

One of the most insightful men I've ever met was a UT law professor who earned the university's highest faculty award. He was legally blind, but he played lots of sports. He saw more than I think I'll ever see. He even corrected my driving. Seriously! He was an active member here. When he wasn't singing in our Chancel Choir, he would climb up in the balcony nearly every Sunday. Otis Stephens' graciousness, spiritual depth, and true insights rivaled any other, so don't let your limitations imprison you.

There was another insightful man you may have heard of. He started a movement which emphasized grace. As legend goes, this weekend 505 years ago, a young priest, Martin Luther,

posted 95 theses on the front of the Wittenberg Castle Church. Luther and many other Reformers upheld three intertwined truths. Among the commonly known truths were: *Sola Gratia (Grace alone)*, *Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone)*, and *Sola Fide (Faith alone)*. The Protestant Reformation rediscovered the biblical truth that God's free grace and salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone.

One of my seminary professors, John Leith, in *The Reformed Imperative*, wrote something that has stuck with me, “The Reformed witness to the world today is that God’s grace is the last word in every human situation...”

Elisha was a conduit of grace, who **understood** God’s ways were above his own. He **understood** well that God knew how times of war could work out differently.

Gracious acts through young and old, female and male, a long time ago and during the Reformation... they are inspirational. If our eyes are open, we see God still uses **vessels of grace** even these days.

For example, on Tuesday, I saw an illustration of God using a woman to show bold, risky and radical love. A video of an Israeli woman who’d been held hostage by Hamas. When they released Yocheved Lifshitz, it was an answer to many people’s prayers. Lifshitz, whose country had been bombed by Hamas, thoughtfully turned back to captives, shook their hand, and said Shalom/peace. She graciously planted more seeds that God can grow. God used an 85-year-old grandmother who’d been beaten, to be an agent of hope.

The world would tell us that it’s too risky to show grace to those who do not like us or that we have trouble getting along with, but the Bible reveals a different, better way. Not always easy, but a way that witnesses to the love of God; that glorifies God even in complicated situations; that counters the world, but with lasting efforts; a way that lifts high the cross of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...” (Mt. 5:38-39). He flipped retributive justice to promote merciful and redemptive justice.

I’m going to close by offering a time of silence to do two things: thank God for your vessels of grace and ask God to open your eyes to see who needs grace.

Connect to the Lord in prayer. Thank God and ask God who is crying loudly, “Have mercy, Son of David!” Who might YOU be a **vessel of grace** for? *Take a moment to yourself to pray...*