

Sermon Series on Sidekicks of the Bible

*Sidekicks of the Bible 3: Elisha, The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*

2 Kings 2:1-3, 7-14; 4:8-22, 27-28, 32-37; 3:11-18

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Today's selection comes from a book called "Kings," but it's really a prophet who I want to talk about. Last week we learned about the judges, who were part rabbi, part military commander, and part prophet. When Israel became a more organized nation with kings of their own, those roles were separated. Temple priests took over the ritual religious roles, and their positions were to an extent inherited in that you had to be part of the tribe of Levi. Kings – another inherited position – took over the military role. And finally, prophets began to appear. They were most in spirit like the old judges in that they were charismatic leaders chosen by God. They could be anyone regardless of bloodline or class. But the role they played is not always well understood by us moderns.

In fact, Israel's prophets played a unique role in the ancient near east. In other countries like Assyria or Egypt, prophets were advisors and soothsayers for the king, telling him whether or not to wage war against his neighbor, or when would be an auspicious time to build a new palace. They were literally employees of the king. But Israel's prophets worked for no one but God. They delivered messages to the king, but those messages were about whether or not the king was living faithfully to *torah*. As you can imagine, they usually weren't. So kings tended to not be very fond of these prophets.

But something else that was unique about the Bible prophets is that they also spoke to the people. For the king was not the only one expected to live according to *torah*. Every Jew was – male or female, slave or free. Granted, the people didn't always uphold that duty any better than the king, so the prophets got in trouble from both sides. Yet despite their unpopularity in their lifetimes, it is, above all, the legacy of the prophets that was remembered, not the kings. After all, not a single Biblical book is named for a king, yet there are eighteen books named after prophets!

There are two very important prophets, though, who didn't get a book named for them. They join Moses in that distinction, and they are Elijah and Elisha. The first you may have heard of. He never died but was taken up to heaven, and Jews ever since have believed he would return one day to announce the coming of the Messiah. Early Christians believed he came back in the form of John the Baptist. Elijah was a very fiery guy who was fierce in his condemnation of the king's abuses, especially the infamous Ahab and his wife Jezebel. The Elijah story quoted most often in sermons today is about when he fled persecution from Jezebel and went to Mt. Horeb, where he encountered God not in the wind or fire or storm, but in the still, small voice, the sound of absolute silence. I've preached on that story often myself, and sometimes I've even included a bit of the message that voice brought. But I never went far enough, for it turns out that after God pronounces the usual judgment on the king and the people, he tells Elijah to find a young farmer named Elisha to groom him as his successor. And that Elisha is the one I want to talk about today.

He is nowhere near as famous or prominent as Elijah, wholly overshadowed as sidekicks always are. But he is a fascinating personality, and a very down-to-earth guy. When Elijah first summons him, he asks permission to first kiss his mother and father goodbye. Then, in a symbolic act that demonstrates how wholeheartedly he embraced his new calling, he burns his ox-yoke and sacrifices the oxen on the fire!

We don't hear again about Elisha until the book of 2 Kings. Here is the most famous story from which we derive the phrase "passing the mantle." (2:1-3, 7-14)

It's a supernatural story, but it contains some very human elements that epitomize what Elisha is all about. First is his devotion to Elijah. In fact, the story repeats three times, with Elijah begging him to remain behind and Elisha declaring that he will follow, even though he knows that God will be taking Elijah away. The Bible isn't big on emotion, but you can hear it ringing through, as Elisha cries, "My father! My father!"

We are told that Elisha receives a double portion of Elijah's spirit, yet aside from copying Elijah's parting-of-the-waters trick (meant to remind us of Moses and thereby proving he's a real prophet), his first recorded prophetic acts are to cure some bad water and to sic a couple of bears on a band of rude youngsters. It's not really a very impressive beginning! Maybe he was just warming up. And yet, throughout his ministry he would work mundane miracles such as these: raising an ax-head that had fallen into a deep pool, curing a pot of stew that had been accidentally made with some bad squash. If you have supernatural powers, is that what you would do with them? Where's the cool, show-stopping stuff, like walking on water or raining down fire? Those are the kind of miracles to write home about! Elisha does some flashy things too, but he more often performs these little miracles that touch the day to day lives of ordinary people. These are things that the prophets of Assyria or Egypt wouldn't bother themselves with. But they weren't beneath Elisha. What mattered to ordinary people mattered to him. The ax-head story, for instance. It isn't just that the ax-head was lost, but that it was borrowed. The poor man wouldn't have been able to replace it. That matters to Elisha. And by association, it matters to God.

There are a number of such stories about Elisha, but let's hear just one. It involves some impressive miracles, but pay attention to the ordinary, human element throughout: 4:8-22, 27-28, 32-37.

There are a number of rich details here. Court prophets were provided for by the king, but not so for Bible prophets. Here a wealthy woman recognizes Elisha's merit, and she not only houses him when he's in town, but she builds a room reserved only for him, furnished and everything. That's a significant dedication of resources. Note that the woman is running the household, and she presages the women who centuries later will provide for Jesus in his ministry. She doesn't do this for gain or prestige. When Elisha offers to do something for her in return, she refuses. Elisha's assistant Gehazi is the one who comes up with the idea of providing her with a son – Elisha's first miracle here, and one she actually refuses because she's afraid to be disappointed. Does this show a lack of faith on her part? Not at all. Rather, it's an example of something so deeply desired that you are afraid to wish for it. And indeed, the child dies from a brain tumor or aneurysm or some such. The Bible shows a rare attention to tender details in the story, how they carry the child home, how she holds him in her lap until he dies, how she lays him out on Elisha's bed – whether in hope or in condemnation. Elisha heals the child, of course, but what strikes me above all in this tale is not the miracles, but this long, ongoing relationship between Elisha and the woman, how they each tend to each other's needs, their mutual respect and regard. Their relationship is the epitome of *torah*: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.

But of course Elisha does not deal only with ordinary people. He deals with kings too, though there aren't too many stories about the latter. Here is one, and compare Elisha's attitude toward the Shunnamite woman with his attitude toward these kings. The set up is that the king of Israel, who is the son of the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel – and the king of Judah, who is not a horrible king – have united to fight against a neighboring king. But they've gotten nowhere in a week, and now they have no water for their camp. (3:11-18)

The kings go to consult Elisha when their campaign stalls, but Elisha speaks contemptuously to the king of Israel. That line about consulting his father's and mother's prophets is a reference to those court prophets who tell the king and queen

what they want to hear. Furthermore, Ahab and Jezebel were notorious for their worship of the Canaanite gods. Everything Elisha says here is an indictment of Jehoram, a reminder that he, like his parents, has forsaken *torah*. Rescuing an ax-head is not beneath Elisha, but dealing with an unfaithful king is! Relationship, though, once more saves the day, and in this case it's Elisha's respect for Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah.

Then there's this interesting line about a musician, a harpist. Prophets would sometimes use music to put themselves into a kind of trance – a practice that continues to this day, for example, in Sufism. But some rabbis comment that Elisha needed the music in order to calm down, because you cannot hear God's voice when you are full of anger. Personally, I like that interpretation! At any rate, it adds another ordinary, everyday detail to this account.

And the way that Elisha promises deliverance is likewise very mundane. They will get water for their camp. Sure, it's a miracle, but as Elisha says, "This is a trifle for God." The victory over their enemy is assured, but what Elisha attends to is the material, physical needs of the people and their animals.

As it turns out, the water plays an interesting role in their victory. When morning dawns, the sun makes the pools of water appear blood red. The Moabites see all this apparent blood and conclude that the two kings and their armies must have killed each other during the night. Gleefully they rush into the camp, only to face their defeat.