

## I. Introduction

A. There is a famous moment in the Wizard of Oz when the film – which opens in black and white – shifts into color. I'd like to read you an account of someone who had a similar experience, although this happened in real life. It's found in 2 Kings 6. It takes place around 850 BC and the young man in question is the prophet Elisha's intern.

B. By way of set up let me note three things:

1. First, Elisha is not Elijah. Elijah was the rough and tumble, loud and a bit bombastic prophet who duked it out with Ahab and Jezebel and challenged the 800 prophets of Baal to a duel on top of the mountain. Elisha was also a prophet, though he was a soft-spoken peacemaker by nature, and he served during the reign of Jehoram – Ahab and Jezebel's son.

2. Second, this is Israel after the split. The Old Testament can be a bit confusing. We not only have to keep Elijah and Elisha straight, but remember that Israel is not always Israel. Sometimes the term refers to the entire nation – all 12 tribes with Jerusalem as her capital. And sometimes it refers to the northern ten tribes, who are running away from God and who have Samaria as her capital. This is the second. (I note this here because Samaria is part of the story).

3. Finally, point three, things are going poorly for Israel under Jehoram. Among other things, he is at war with the King of Aram<sup>1</sup> – which is modern day Syria. (Israel and Syria are not getting along? Some things don't change). This story deals in part with Elisha helping Jehoram by telling him the secret plans Ben Hadad II (the King of Syria).

## II. 2 Kings 6:8ff

A. Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, "I will set up my camp in such and such a place."

B. <sup>9</sup>The man of God (This is referring to Elisha) sent word to the king of Israel: "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there." So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places.

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<sup>1</sup> Probably Ben-Hadad II

C. <sup>11</sup> This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, “Will you not tell me which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?”

1. Which of you is a spy for Israel? Who is texting the other side our GPS coordinates? Who is posting our plans on Facebook?

D. <sup>12</sup> “None of us, my lord the king,” said one of his officers, “but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom.”

E. <sup>13</sup> “Go, find out where he is,” the king ordered, “so I can send men & capture him.” The report came back: “He is in Dothan.” Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city.

1. Dothan is a small city about 11 miles from Samaria (about 80 miles from Jerusalem). And like all cities at that time, it was small and surrounded by a wall.

2. The opposing army either: 1) broke down the gate; 2) scaled the wall; or 3) waited until the people ran out of water and food.

F. <sup>15</sup> When the servant of the man of God<sup>2</sup> – this is Elisha’s intern – when the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh, my lord, what shall we do?” the servant asked.

1. He sees the city surrounded by Aram’s army. He knows they are not there on tourist visas. His fight or flight response has kicked in – but neither work. There is nowhere to run and no way to fight. They are trapped.<sup>3</sup>

G. He cries out: My lord (this refers to Elisha), “My lord, what are we going to do?”

H. <sup>16</sup> “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

I. <sup>17</sup> And Elisha prayed, “O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

1. Wow! By the way, if you were wondering where the term *Chariots of Fire* came from, there you go: he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire.

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<sup>2</sup> This is Elisha’s intern. He’s new because the last intern (Gehazi) had just come down with leprosy. See 2 Kings 5.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly in the same spot where Joseph had been thrown in a pit by his brothers hundreds of years earlier

III. What happened here is that Elisha asked God to let the intern see the truth – to see unencumbered reality.

A. And unencumbered reality shows that God has everything under control. There was an army of angels between Elisha and his intern and the soldiers from Aram – soldiers (protectors) – who had not arrived when Elisha prayed. They were already there. The prayer was so the intern could see behind the veil.

B. It's pretty exciting stuff – especially for the intern! Elisha seems rather nonchalant about it, perhaps because he sees this stuff all the time. Either that or his faith – his trust in God – is that strong. Whatever the case, his next move is to ask God to strike the army with some sort of temporary blindness or confusion, and he then leads them into Samaria – the capital of Israel – where they are surrounded by Jewish soldiers.

C. When Jotham (the king) sees them, he asks Elisha (vs 21), “Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?”

D. <sup>22</sup>“Do not kill them,” he answered. “Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master.” So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory.

E. The whole thing reads a bit like an Andy Griffith episode. Andy is Elisha. Barney is the intern. Barney panics when he sees the army. Andy calms everyone down and ends up resolving everything peacefully and then Aunt B serves a big meal and everyone agrees to be kind to one another after that.

IV. I had a hard time with the story for a while.

A. One of the very first times I ever preached – thirty some years ago – my sermon was based on this text. And the message was so bad, not just in delivery but in content, that during the middle of the sermon someone stood up and corrected me. I've had a hard time not relieving that moment when I read this passage. But I think I'm finally over it and can actually enjoy it.

V. There are a few things worth noting.

A. The first is the counsel Elisha offers his understudy: do not be afraid.

1. The Bible has a lot to say about fear. “Do not be afraid” is a common refrain. And it is often said at the most terrifying moments – such as when the Jews are trapped between the Red Sea and the approaching Egyptian army!

2. It’s not that we are never to fear. We are told that we should fear God. I hesitate to bring this up because only half of you need to hear this. You already fear God. You don’t see him as gracious and loving. You feel like he is ever disappointed in you. I don’t want to reinforce that thinking. But half of you feel pretty good about yourself. Your view of who you are and who God is is way off. You need to hear what Christ said in Matthew 10, “Do not fear those who can destroy body but not destroy our soul.” We could spend a fair bit of time thinking about fear.

B. It’s also worth being reminded about the spiritual realm that goes unseen.

1. There are more than 250 references to angels in the Bible – spiritual beings who, among other things, often come to our aid, even when we are unaware of it.

VI. The text provides us with plenty to think about. I want us to focus on our need to see through the eyes of faith.

A. We need to be more aware of what matters and what is going on around us. We need to grow in our ability to see the world through God’s eyes.

B. By this I do not mean that we need to see angels. I do not know how we’d go about doing that. Right now our vision is limited. As Paul notes in I Corinthians 13, our vision is dim. But we can learn to see the world more like God sees it. More like it really is.

C. I can learn to see things less from the vantage point of a 51 year old, Anglo, American male – educated but selfish and biased.

D. How do I do that? Hmm... that’s a great question. One I’ve been thinking about for a while, well before I started working on this sermon.

1. Last year I started facilitating a young preacher's formation group that a friend started. The idea is that the church desperately needs better preaching – sermons that help people become more Christ-centered, wise, loving and just. And that you can't teach young people to preach those kind of sermons by focusing on technique – you have to focus on the spiritual formation of preachers. And to that end I'm helping facilitate a group of about a dozen young preachers and part of the curriculum we've been working on focuses on our vision. Not "vision in a management sense of a big, compelling picture of the future," but vision as in, what do you see in the world? What and who are you looking at? What is not there that should be – that God wants to be?

2. And then I spent the last part of this week at a conference entitled, Preaching in a Visual Age. It was held in Los Angeles – in fact it was held in the old Warner Brothers Pacific Theater on Hollywood Blvd, where the Academy Awards have been held. That's now a bad part of town. The theater struggled, was closed after an earthquake. Later became an adult movie theater. It's now a church. The event was a gathering of artists, movie and tv directors, screen writers, USC film professors, creative folks from Disney and Pixar, seminary professors and pastors. And there was a lot of time talking about how we learn and how we are shaped and what we see and how we need to train ourselves to see. It talked about our vision from a different point. I flew back yesterday morning, so I'm still not sure what I learned there.

VII. But a few things are clear. We need to think more about what we see. And we need to work on seeing the world more like Christ does. How can we do this? There are several things we can do.

A. Listen more, especially to those who are not like us. This political season has made it clear that very few people really listen to those who think differently than they do. Very few people seem willing or able to think rather than react. But I believe that listening to others helps us get closer to the truth – and God is always on the side of truth.

B. Second, we need to ask for wisdom. To pray for it. To pray a prayer not unlike the one Elisha prayed for his understudy. It was a different context. But not entirely. He prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see."

C. Third, we need to grow in faith in Christ. We need to attend to our call to follow Christ – to become more like him, which leads us down the path we've talked about for the last five years. Our shorthand for the way forward is: worship, connect, grow, serve and share.

1. We worship – we come to settings like this with the goal of focusing on Him. Being reminded how good and gracious he is and being aligned because of that time.
2. We connect with others – we grow through discussion and prayer and doing life together with others.
3. We read the Bible – especially the Gospels – and pray.
4. We serve others. We die to self and put the needs of others ahead of our own. We pick up our cross to become more like Christ.
5. We share our life – our faith, our finances, our life.

D. On that point let me say that it's really fun to hear John and Kathy's stories. They took a risk, stepped out and it not only helped others, it helped them. I had the same experience. I led a group through the church and also led a group of guys in our neighborhood, only one of whom comes to Christ Church.

E. By the way, while I am here, let me push you in a very specific direction. Some of you have taken ground in the last couple months. You are growing. And part of that has come through your involvement in a small group. Don't stop now. You need to be in community. The group you are in – if it's new – is probably not that yet. But it's moving in that direction. Make it a priority. Or get in a group where you can.

1. It does not have to be through Christ Church. That's not the key. The key is, you have people who love God and you – and are helping you walk forward with Christ and you are committed to that. You make it a weekly priority.
2. We are doing what we can to make keeping these groups going as easy as possible. To that end we created a four week video-based curriculum called The Land of Faith. It was shot in Israel. There are workbooks that go with it. We created this four week curriculum to give you a reason to keep meeting into December – when you can have a little Christmas party.
3. And then in January we are going to begin the Gospel of Luke, and every week I will be making available transcripts of my sermons with questions for you to discuss. I am very excited about this study in Luke.
  - a) One of the ah hah moments I've had over the last couple years was – more Jesus less Paul.
  - b) No place better for more Jesus than a Gospel. So, we will be in Luke for a while. Great book.

c) And the sermon-based small group material is an easy way for you to keep your groups going, or start a new one.

F. Men and women, if you want to see more of what is going on around you – if you want to be more awake to the spiritual dynamics that are in play – you can do no better than to focus on Jesus. Do everything you can to move in that direction.

G. Which leads us to one of the last obvious ways, and that is to come to this table to be strengthened by Christ.

#### VIII. Move into Communion