



F O U R T H S U N D A Y

2 KINGS 2:19-22

NIV: The people of the city said to Elisha, "Look, our lord, this town is well-situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive."

"Bring me a new bowl," he said, "and put salt in it." So they brought it to him.

Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, "This is what the Lord says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.'" And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha has spoken.

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

In the Second Book of Kings we find a small story, hardly noticed, barely ever preached upon. A prophet is in mourning, a village is desperate, a nation is falling to pieces. Then, suddenly, God acts in a way that transforms the entire region, not just for a season, but for generations to come. By paying attention to this story, we will discover

a small and simple way that we can be part of the same transformation in the present day.

This small, often-overlooked story is about one of the first miracles performed by the prophet Elisha. This story takes place against the backdrop of loud and intense drama. The prophet Elijah has been locked in a confrontation with the wicked and idolatrous King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Elijah has caused drought, called down fire from the sky, and worked himself to the point of exhaustion. In contrast, this short story is quiet and decidedly undramatic, but takes place after one of the most famous stories in Hebrew scriptures.

When Elijah was feeling discouraged and unable to continue his ministry, as we read on the First Sunday of Lent in 1st Kings, God sent him an assistant, Elisha, and a whole team of prophets to help him in his work. After a period of mentorship, God gives Elijah special permission to retire.

Elijah and Elisha make their way to the Jordan River and, in a scene fraught with emotion, Elijah is taken to heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by a chariot of fire. Elisha picks up his mantle, which had fallen to the ground. He makes his way to



the river and smacks the mantle on the water, which immediately parts before him. It's hard to focus on this small passage amidst a story full of whirlwinds, chariots of fire, and parting of waters.

Elisha goes on to have one of the greatest ministries of any prophet, working great wonders - many of which foreshadowed the miraculous works of Jesus. He multiplied loaves of bread to feed a great crowd, raised a young boy from the dead, and healed a foreign dignitary of his leprosy. With such great deeds, it's easy to overlook the miracle of the well made well.

In the context of his ministry, though, this is a terribly important moment. As we pick up the story, Elisha's future is anything but certain. He picks up Elijah's mantle, but his authority is in doubt. Prophets who have been following Elijah are not ready to transfer their loyalty to Elisha. In a season of danger, Elijah, who could control the rains and call down fire from heaven, gave them a sense of security and protection. His prophets aren't ready to let go of that sense of security.

When Elisha comes back across the Jordan River alone, they panic. Even though Elisha explains how Elijah was taken up to heaven, they organize a search party to see what became of him. Uncertain of what to do, Elisha settles into Jericho and mourns the loss of his father-figure, Elijah. Paralyzed by grief, it seems very likely that the community of prophets will drift apart and the work of

resistance will fizzle out.

And then, the leaders of the city come to Elisha. They explain to him that there is something wrong with their well. "The water is bad and the land is unfruitful." This is a significant moment for Elisha - a test, a chance to prove his authority. Notice that the people and the prophets have very different ideas about where a prophet's authority comes from. Prophets want to know if Elijah is really gone, if a former transfer of power has been conducted. The people of Jericho, though, aren't interested in his credentials. They only want to know if he can fix their water.

They state how well-situated their city is. They beg that Elisha see it that way, too. See the assets, see how much good is already here. Yet, we don't have clean water - that is all we need to make this place fruitful, prosperous, and whole.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TO MINISTRY

We know that the people of Jericho took pride in their community. They were also able to identify the root cause of their struggles (lack of clean water). This may not seem like a remarkable accomplishment until you consider how much time and energy organizations put into treating the

symptoms without actually curing the illness.

Nothing grows in Jericho. The word translated as "unfruitful" has connotations of miscarriage. The people of Jericho experienced a particular kind of pain. Every Spring, they plant seeds. Green shoots sprout. Trees blossom in their orchards. The people get their hopes up that there will be a harvest. But, then something goes horribly wrong. The branches of the trees bear bitter and inedible fruit. The green shoots wither and rot. They probably have tried numerous approaches to remedy their problem.

By the time Elisha arrives, Jericho is like the woman who touches the hem of Jesus' garment, hoping to stop the bleeding. She has spent all her money on doctors who failed to cure her illness, perhaps because they were so fixated on the symptoms that they couldn't or wouldn't hear her when she told them what the problem was.

In Jericho, the problem is the water. All of the fertilizer, all of the seeds, and growing techniques won't save the city if the water is bad. The same is true of any city, community, or village today.

There's a lesson in this story for the church today, a lesson that church leaders would do well to heed. Our neighbors don't care much about what denomination a congregation belongs to. They don't care much about what seminary the pastor attended or which bishop laid

hands on the pastor. They aren't interested in our creeds or our doctrines. When our neighbors are reaching out to the church they may simply want to know: Do we care that there is something wrong with their water? Are we willing to do something about it? If so, this could open up a door for us to share the gospel with our neighbors and soften their hearts, so that they may be receptive.

The work of listening to the people and learning from local leaders is as important as the work of digging wells and purifying water. . If the ministry is going to succeed, we need to see people as partners and the community as a seed, waiting to be watered.

Q U E S T I O N S T O P O N D E R

Elisha knew that by taking care of the water, the community would trust him, allowing him to lead them closer to God.

- What can we as a church do to serve our community? the world?
- Have you ever experienced a problem with your water?
- Have you ever been given a boil-advisory? (a notice that you need to boil your water, in order to make it safe for consumption.)