

This Sermon Delivered By
Dr. Lane Alderman, Pastor
Roswell Presbyterian Church
Roswell, GA February 25, 2007

“Believe on the Evidence: Greater Things Than These”
II Kings 2:1-14; John 14:8-14

One of the great challenges in the world of preaching is to take a text from the Bible, a story that in some cases took place 3000 years ago, and to make that story relevant in today’s modern world.

Karl Barth, a great theologian of the twentieth century, once said that we should preach with the Bible in one hand and the day’s newspaper in the other, because our goal is to take these lessons from the pages of Scripture and apply them to the world in which you and I are living. That’s our goal. And sometimes, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, sometimes, we pull it off.

One of the great miracles of Sunday morning is that somehow God is at work and that through these words from this ancient story and through the sometimes fumbling words which I speak, we actually hear God speaking to us, encouraging us, challenging us, giving us strength to keep on keeping on. It’s nothing short of a miracle.

But that’s our goal. To make this ancient text relevant in a modern world. So a few months ago when Richard came to me and said, “I’ve got an idea for a Lenten series of sermons. I think we should focus on Elisha during Lent.”

“Elijah,” I said?

“No,” he said. “Elisha.” I thought maybe Richard was just trying to be funny. You know, a little preacher’s humor. After all, he and I have worked together for over twelve years. Maybe he just thought we needed something new to challenge us. Let’s pull out an obscure Old Testament figure, preach a whole series of sermons on his life, and try to find ways to make his life relevant to ours. Yea, Richard. Sounds like a good idea.

But the more we got into it, the better it sounded. Elisha really is a pretty fascinating person. So during this Lenten season, as we begin our journey to the cross, we’re going to spend some time each week looking at our modern world through the lens of this often overlooked but vitally important prophet named Elisha.

We are going to take one Sunday off from Elisha, and I want to make sure you know about it. March 18 will be the morning after our “One Night” event, and Fil Anderson will be preaching at all three services that morning. You won’t want to miss him. He’s a great preacher, and I promise you God will have a message for us on that morning.

But back to Elisha. Let's begin with the beginning... the story of how Elisha got started in the first place. We're reading from II Kings, the second chapter. I'm praying that through this ancient story, God will have a word for each of our modern lives. Let's take a look.

-- II Kings 2:1-14 --

We don't really know much about Elisha's life up to this point. He first appears on the scene back in the ninetieth chapter of first Kings when he's out plowing the field and God tells Elijah to go appoint him as his successor.

Elijah goes on to be the much better known of the two prophets. Elijah is the prophet who has the great confrontation on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Baal. "If the Lord be God, then choose him, but if Baal be god, then choose him." That's Elijah. That story we just read is about Elijah being taken off in the chariots. He never really dies. The chariots of God come and lift him up into heaven. "Swing lo, sweet chariot."

It's Elijah who appears at the transfiguration of Jesus. There he is on the mountain with Moses and Jesus. That's Elijah. But what about Elisha? He's our focus.

Well here's the amazing thing. Elisha goes on to do amazing things. Maybe even more amazing and incredible than Elijah himself. In fact, Elisha doesn't get nearly the publicity of Elijah, but in the history of God's people, he becomes a very critical, crucial figure.

In some respects his life parallels what Jesus said when he told his disciples, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these."

Did you catch that line a moment ago? Those who believe in Jesus will do even greater things than Jesus did. That's an amazing promise. Greater than Jesus? I've never once calmed the sea when the winds were blowing. I've never once restored sight to a blind person. How could we ever do greater things than what Jesus did?

But then take another look. At the time of Jesus, a few hundred, maybe a few thousand people in the region of Judea, heard this message. Since then millions of people in every corner of the globe have heard the message and responded. Lives have been changed. Homes have been restored and hopes have been renewed.

Sight has been restored, in unexplainable ways at times, and day after day in hospital operating rooms through procedures developed as people have used their God-given talents and abilities.

The hungry have been fed, the homeless have found shelter. Of course there is a much, much more that remains to be done. But great things, certainly greater in scope, great things have been done in the name of Christ all over the world.

During this Lenten season, we're going to be hearing stories about our Faith in Action ministry, and we each will have the opportunity to make special gifts and pledges to the work of God through the Faith in Action offering.

It's amazing to me what God is doing just through the Roswell Presbyterian Church. And then I remind myself. These stories I hear are just the tip of the iceberg of what's going on here at RPC. And what's happening at RPC is just the tip of the much bigger iceberg of what God is doing in and through churches all over the world. And what God is doing in 2007 is just the tip of an even greater iceberg of what God has been doing in the last 2000 years.

Greater things than these? Look around this room and we could share story after story of God's work, and those stories are just one small fraction of all God is doing. Lives are changed and children and young people are hearing the good news just right here in this congregation. Greater things than what happened during the life of Jesus? Absolutely.

But what's the key to making sure that continues? What do we need to know to make sure great things keep on happening in our midst?

Well, let's go back to Elisha for a moment. *I want us to notice that when God called Elisha, it was a great affirmation from God.*

God saw something in Elisha and knew that there was a role for him to play in his kingdom.

And let me make sure you hear this. God sees that in each of us as well. In the very first Christian sermon ever preached, Peter, on the day of Pentecost, affirmed that God's Spirit now rests on all of his people, and that God is calling each of us to play an important role in the building of his kingdom.

In Jim Collins' book Good to Great, he talks about how important it is for successful companies to identify the right people for the right job. He uses the image of getting the right people on the bus and then making sure that you have them in the right seat on that bus. Sometimes, he says, you might have to move people around to different seats on the bus, and sometimes, you even have to get some people off the bus. It's just not the right place for them.

Well let's be clear. In the building of God's kingdom, there is a place on the bus for each of us. God is calling every one of us to be part of his kingdom, and there is a role, a purpose, we each need to fill.

I want you to hear that as a great affirmation of how much God thinks of each one of us.

You may have heard the apocryphal story about when Jesus first arrived in heaven and the angel Michael asked him what was going to happen next. "Oh," Jesus said, "I've left the building of my kingdom in the hands of my twelve apostles."

"But what if they fail? What's the back up plan," Michael asked?

"There is no back up plan," Jesus said. Jesus has enough confidence in each of us that he is actually entrusting the building of his kingdom to us.

One of my favorite sermons that the late Frank Harrington preached years ago at Peachtree Church was entitled, “I’m Just A Page Turner in the Music Department.” I still have a copy. He told about a time he went to preach at another church and was so appreciative of how good the choir was. After the service he stopped a woman who was wearing a choir robe to say to her how much he liked the music that morning.

“Oh, don’t thank me,” she said. “I’m just a page turner in the music department.” He went on to make the point that in God’s kingdom, there are no unimportant roles to be played. Each of us is important. God has a need and a purpose and a role for each one of us.

And if you haven’t found that place to put your gifts to work, give us a call. We want to help you find that place where your gift meets the world’s need.

In a world which often says we have to make a certain score, or have a certain amount of experience, or be a certain size or shape, in a world with all sorts of expectations, God says, “I have a place and a purpose for you in my kingdom.”

It is a great affirmation that God thinks enough of each one of us that he is calling us all to be at work in his kingdom. There is a place on the bus for each of us.

But I want you to notice that God’s call to Elisha was a great challenge as well. God had great confidence in Elisha, and it was a great affirmation of God’s need for Elisha, but there it was also an important challenge for Elisha to be faithful in living up to God’s call.

Did you notice in the story that three different times Elijah would head off in different directions, and each time Elisha followed wherever Elijah would go. Elisha was faithful and obedient and willing to follow.

In verse 10, Elisha asked for a “double share of your spirit,” which didn’t mean he wanted twice as much as Elijah had. A “double share” referred to the way an inheritance was passed on. When a father would die, his inheritance would be divided up among his sons, and his eldest son would get a “double share.” Elisha is asking to be treated as that eldest son. Treat me in the favored position, he says.

And look what Elijah says. “If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you.” That wasn’t just a magical test of some kind. The sense of the Hebrew is that to “see” Elijah was to understand him, to really perceive what he was up to, to really comprehend what he was doing.

For Elisha to “see” and understand Elijah was going to take humility on his part. It meant Elisha had to be faithful in acknowledging that Elijah was someone worth following.

Likewise, if we’re going to understand God’s call in our lives, there is a challenge to take the time to grow in our relationship with God, to take the time to learn and to study.

If we want to experience the fullness of life that God has for us, we need to be open to his leading. That's why we spend so much time and energy encouraging people to be involved in Bible study. It's the primary way God gives us direction and leadership.

Whether it is in our personal lives as we make decisions about how to spend our time and our money, or whether it is our relationships with others as we ask God to help us be more patient or to be more understanding, or whether it is in decisions we make about where to serve in the life of the church. The challenge is to be faithful.

With humility, we need to spend the time developing and nurturing our walk with God so that we will hear that voice of God directing our steps. To use Jim Collins' analogy, there is a place for us on the bus, but we need to spend time listening to God to make sure we know which seat on the bus is ours.

Being called by God, and we are all called by God, is a challenge to be faithful in our living.

But I want you to notice, finally, that God's call is also a great promise. Over the next few weeks, we're going to discover that God didn't just call Elisha and send him out on his own to get the work accomplished. God was with him, literally every step of the way,

After Elijah was taken up into heaven, Elisha was left standing there with the mantle that Elijah had worn. The mantle was a coat or a robe. It would have been draped over Elijah's shoulders, and when Elijah was taken up in the chariot it was left there on the ground.

For Elisha, it would have been the symbol of God's presence in his life. It was the reminder that God's power was what gave him his strength.

In fact, as Elisha walked off with the mantle over his shoulders, the very first thing he does is to strike the waters of the Jordan, and God parts the waters, just as he had done for Elijah, just as he had done for Moses and the people of Israel years earlier.

I'm not suggesting that God will part all the waters for us that stand in our way. Nor is there the thought that when we follow God there will never be challenges or struggles along the way. Elisha certainly had his share.

Following where God leads is not a promise of life on easy street. There are still hurdles to get over, still challenges to face. Good, faithful Christians still get sick, still face problems.

The promise God makes is that through it all, he will give us his strength and his peace and presence. We aren't alone.

Well I have to admit. I've read the stories of Elisha plenty of times in the past, but I have never really paid attention to him. But I'm convinced God has a lot to teach us during this Lenten season through this ancient prophet. It's the season of Lent, a time of honest reflection, a time for each of us to take a look at our walk with Christ and ask ourselves, how am I doing in my relationship with Jesus?

Along the way, we're going to discover that God is doing greater things in us and through us than we can ever imagine.

It's a great affirmation of what God thinks of each one of us. Each person here is special, a unique member of God's family. And God is calling each one of us to be part of his kingdom.

That call is a great challenge for each of us. It means being faithful and taking the time to listen to what God is saying.

But along the way, we'll experience the incredible promise God makes to each of us of his love and his strength and his presence.

There will be trials and struggles along the way, but may this always be our prayer, that "when the woes of life o'er take me, hopes deceive and fears annoy, never shall the cross forsake me, lo! It glows with peace and joy."

May that peace and that joy renew each of our lives today and for all of eternity. AMEN.