



North Shore
Congregational
Church
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Making Room”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

2 Kings 4: 8-37

July 7, 2019

Today, we start a new series that’s going to guide the majority of our worship over the course of this summer.

Consider Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Samuel, David, Mary, Joseph, Peter Paul, Stephen, James, I could go on and on and on with the heroes of the Bible that we know so well. Scripture, front to back, is the story of God and God’s people – and it is full of those characters that embolden our faith and enliven our discipleship again and again.

Underneath this array of Biblical notables, however, is a sea of Biblical nobodies – characters that pop up for one or two scenes, speak their voice to our lives of faith, and then fade into the background of the Biblical narrative. These are voices and stories that go largely unnoticed in our studies and our reflections, but over the course of the next 2 months, we’re going to take notice.

Each Sunday (save a few special events along the way), we will take a look at one of these tertiary characters of Scripture, and we’ll reflect a little about what their voice speaks to our faith today. Then, each Tuesday and Thursday, we will be sharing devotionals drawn from additional characters, on Facebook. To start it all off, however, we go to the book of 2 Kings and dig into the story of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4: 8-37.

8 One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. 9 She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. 10 Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

11 One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. 12 He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. 13 He said to him, “Say to her, Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” 14 He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and

her husband is old.” 15 He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. 16 He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

17 The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her.

18 When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. 19 He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” 20 He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. 21 She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. 22 Then she called to her husband, and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” 23 He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” 24 Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” 25 So she set out, and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; 26 run at once to meet her, and say to her, Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” 27 When she came to the man of God at the mountain, she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away. But the man of God said, “Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me.” 28 Then she said, “Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, Do not mislead me?” 29 He said to Gehazi, “Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer; and lay my staff on the face of the child.” 30 Then the mother of the child said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you.” So he rose up and followed her. 31 Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, “The child has not awakened.”

32 When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. 33 So he went in and closed the door on the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. 34 Then he got up on the bed[b] and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. 35 He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. 36 Elisha[c] summoned Gehazi and said, “Call the Shunammite woman.” So he called her. When she came to him, he said, “Take your son.” 37 She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

It’s an intriguing story – this relationship between Elisha and the Shunammite woman. To start, however, we need to know who Elisha was. Elisha was a disciple of Elijah – one of the great prophets of Israel. Elisha studied under Elijah and, in time, grew to a special place in Elijah’s heart. Upon Elijah’s death, in fact, it was Elisha who requested, and received, a ‘double portion’

of Elijah's spirit – the spiritual equivalent of the property claim of a first-born son. And then, for much of the 9th century BC, Elisha was the preeminent prophet of Israel – a prophet to people, soldiers and kings.

Knowing of this man as a man of God, then, the well-to-do Shunammite woman of 2 Kings takes it upon herself to set a place for Elisha. Whenever he passed through town (which was a relatively frequent occurrence), he would find food and rest in her home. The story that unfolds in this chapter, and later in 2 Kings, is the one that drew me to our Call to Meditation this morning. “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,” is a common platitude, and one that can send us down some pretty tricky theological rabbit holes. The underlying reality it reflects, however, is that life has its turns. Sometimes things go well, sometimes they don't. Sometimes life feels like the blessing that it is, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it feels like God is giving with both hands and more, and sometimes it feels like God is taking just as much. Life has its turns, and that was the experience of the Shunammite woman. She was unable to have a child, then she was able to have a child. Her child grew ill and died, then her child was brought back to life. Her land was ravaged by famine and she fled, and then the king restored her land when she returned. The Shunammite woman lived a life that is reminiscent of that which we all know every day – a life that twists and turns from blessing to strife again and again. What I find so striking about her story, however, is the room she has set in the middle of it all!

That's the voice of the Shunammite woman that I think is crying out to the busy, overwhelmed, and ever-distracted lives of the 21st century Christian – a voice asking how it is we are making room for God in the midst of it all!

What jumped out to me about the story of this woman, really more than anything else, is the manner in which that one thing never changed. She had her ups and downs – things went well and things didn't – but that room was always ready. Whether it was a time when she needed Elisha to come into her life, a time when Elisha wanted to come into her life, or a time in between, she had that room ready! You can almost picture it – a bed neatly made, a wash basin with fresh water in the corner, perhaps the candle was always lit just in case... It didn't matter if it felt like the Lord was giving or taking, it didn't matter what she had pulling her in any direction, she had the room ready for the presence of God (in her case in the form of Elisha) to make its way into her life. And, it's because of that room that she made that God continued to enter!

When the woman found herself without a child, it was because of the room she made for him that Elisha worked the miracle of birth into her life. When that child became ill and died, it was because of the room she made for him that Elisha restored that child to life. When her life was ravaged by famine, it was because of the room she had made for him that Elisha worked in the king to restore her property. It's a simple story, and perhaps a simplistic reading of it, but the thing that stood out to me about this unnamed women of nearly 3,000 years ago was that she saw the opportunity for the voice of God to enter her life, and she found a way to make sure there was ever and always room for that to happen. When she needed it – the room was there. When he longed to come in – the room was there. No matter what she was enduring or what was happening – the room was there.

3,000 years later, I'm not sure there us a more important question for us to explore in the pursuit of our everyday faith. I came across a statistic a few weeks ago in which the person suggested that 20 years ago 80% of all church-goers reported weekly attendance as their normal routine. Today, that same number is only 15%. Now, I wasn't able to find the original study to verify the claims, but I can tell you, anecdotally, that it is something I've seen over the last 20 years. So, think about it. 20 years ago, 4 out of 5 Christians said that their normal routine was to attend church every week. Today, only 1 in 7 can make the same claim. Look up statistics on prayer or Biblical study and you'll find the same disturbing trends.

How many of us can truly say we've set the room for God? In our lives of being pulled in 72 different directions in every moment...in our minds bustling with thoughts of unpaid bills, overgrown lawns, weed-infested gardens, and endless task lists...in schedules that rarely seem to leave us enough time to even sleep...where is the room for God? If we find ourselves in need, is there a place ready for him to enter? If God has grace and blessing to bring, is there room for that to come? In our daily living that never seems to have enough time, or energy, or mental acuity...are we making room? Through worship...through study...through prayer...are we setting a place for God to come in?

The wonder of the story of that Shunammite woman is that she made a purposeful decision to make space into which this prophet, this voice of God, could enter at any and every time – and in doing so she engaged God's tremendous miracles in her life. Today, 3,000 years later, in lives that never seem to even have room for our lives – I think her voice might have a bit to say about the room (or perhaps more distinctly the lack thereof) that we are making in the midst of it all.