

## 2 Kings 6-7

When I was younger. When I was a kid

We spent our holidays in a magical place on the south coast. My grandmother's holiday shack sat high enough that, from the dining table, you could look out over the wind-battered heath on the headland, out past the rocky islands to the horizon. We always wondered how far it was to New Zealand. It felt like we could see that far if we looked hard enough through the binoculars.

By night, you'd catch glimpses, in the north, of the lighthouse flashing to guide the sailors on their way.

By day the vast ocean surged and sprayed, or sparkled with blinding sunlight, or waited, grey and restless.

Do you remember when you strapped the mask to your face and took that first wet glimpse beneath the surface? Do you remember the thrill of seeing life you never knew was there, the fish rushing by on their way, the strappy leaves of sea grasses swaying with the currents and waves? The colours in the rocks, shells and corals? Do you remember the wonder of a world waiting to be explored? Child-like wonder?

Wonder is a naïve experience, innocent and pure. It's not critical or cynical.

Now, I've sat with these chapters of 2 kings for many months now. I've been turning the stories over in my mind, trying to discern theological themes, asking for pastoral insight, looking for narrative direction, and I've landed with wonder. Innocent and naïve wonder.

Like that childhood experience that opens your eyes to a new world of possibilities, these stories of God, here with his people, are here make us stop and wonder.

The stories aren't attempting to avert your gaze from the very real and pressing heavy realities of life. They're not trying to paint a romantic impression of the world we live in. No, they're here in the books of 1 and 2 kings, where we read of kings and kingdoms being overthrown, we witness murders and deception and heartache and sickness and tragedy and generosity and injustice and love and lust and politics and revolution and incompetence and wisdom and folly and foolhardiness and retribution and dispossession.

These stories aren't naïve in the sense that they pretend everything is OK with the world. They sit here in real life and invite us to **experience** something more, to **see** something more, to **hear** something more; it's God's persistent benevolence in prophetic deed, prophetic vision and in prophetic word; and it's wonderful.

---

In the first of our stories we experience the wonder of God in prophetic deed, and we find ourselves once again among the company of the prophets. Throughout the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and

2 Kings we catch glimpses of these enigmatic gatherings, perhaps some kind of monastic order, or spiritual academy. I don't know whether the prophetic vocation was a lifestyle for these people or whether they gathered from time to time to share their gift in the midst of their ordinary lives. They're just there in the story, gloriously obscure. Back in chapter 2 we met companies of the prophets from Bethel and Jericho, where they seemed to have a divine insight into Elijah's imminent departure. Here in our story, the company of prophets is gathered around Elisha and they need a new place to meet. One of them comes up with a plan to build a new structure down by the Jordan River. They convince Elisha to come with them and set about cutting down trees to construct this meeting place.

One of the men is cutting down a tree with his axe and the head goes flying off the handle and lands in the river.

Now I know what it's like to lose a tool. It's seriously inconvenient and expensive. I've buried tools, broken tools, left them up high where you can't see them. Sometimes a tool is sitting in plain sight, but still it takes me 5 minutes to find it. From time to time you win and find a tool that someone else lost in a ceiling cavity or on top of a hot water system but usually you lose, and you have to go out and buy a new one.

Well this man lost his tool, and to make matters worse, it wasn't even his tool, he'd borrowed it from a friend. I know plenty of people who won't let anyone borrow their tools for precisely this reason. Someone's going to be using it to cut down a tree and it's going to end up in the river.

This fellow here feels the weight of the loss and cries out to Elisha, "Oh, my lord, it was borrowed."

He points to where it fell into the water. Elisha cuts a stick and throws it in the water. The iron axe head floats to the surface. Elisha tells the man to lift it out. He reaches out and grabs it.

And I wonder, what would God be doing making an axe head float on water when there are kings that need direction and foreign armies scheming for war, there's a desperate need for religious reformation and spiritual revival. There's a world that needs saving and God is here, in the prophetic deed of Elisha, giving this man back his lost tool. I wonder...that God would stoop so low...that God would be present in such a mundane moment.

I wonder at God's imminence, that he is here.

And I wonder that an angel of the Lord would appear to a carpenter in a dream and tell him to stay engaged to his already pregnant fiancée because God was stooping to touch our world and enter into our story. I wonder at the coming of Jesus, that they would call his name Immanuel – God with us.

---

Our second story introduces us to the wonder of God in prophetic vision. Do you remember Naaman from last week, who was healed of his leprosy after bathing in the Jordan River on the advice of Elisha? Naaman was a commander in the army of Aram, to the northeast. The current king of Aram, Ben-Hadad, had been stirring up trouble for the nation during the reign of Ahab, one of the former kings of Israel. Back then, God gave his people victory over their oppressive enemies, but Ahab spared the life of Ben-Hadad and he was condemned for it, a prophet told him, "This is what the LORD says: 'You have set free a man I had determined should die. Therefore, it is your life for his life, your people for his people.'"

And so, the fateful day came and went that Ahab fell to an Aramean arrow in battle. And the premonition of the prophet that the people would also suffer at the hand of the Syrians was, likewise, to be proved true, again, and again, and again.

Here in our story today, we find the Arameans, once again, at war with Israel. But they can't seem to conceal their covert operations and maintain the element of surprise. It seems that someone is leaking top-secret military information to the king of Israel, who has been able to thwart all the Aramean attempts to get the upper hand. And the king of Aram is furious. He gathers his officers and says, "Which one of us is on the side of the king of Israel." But it's not a spy in the ranks. It's Elisha the prophet. Elisha has been sending messages to the king of Israel, letting him know all the movements of the Arameans. And one of the Aramean officers knows this, it's entirely possible that there was an Aramean spy in the Israelite court, or perhaps Elisha's fame was just so well known because of Naaman's healing. Either way, the Aramean king now knows who to target. He finds out that Elisha is the town of Dothan, sends a strong force with horses and chariots, and surrounds the city at night.

Elisha's servant gets up early in the morning. He sees the army all around. He says to Elisha, "Oh my lord, what shall we do?"

Elisha answers, "Don't be afraid, Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

That's a strange thing to say. I wonder, what on earth is he talking about?

And Elisha prays that the servant's eyes would be opened to see something he was blind to. Earlier he saw the city surrounded by an Aramean army with horses and chariots. Now he sees the hills full of fiery horses and chariots all around Elisha.

As the enemy advances, Elisha prays and the entire army is struck with blindness.

Elisha speaks to them, "This is not the road and this is not the city", and leads them to Samaria, the Israelite capital. He prays again, "LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see." The soldiers see again and what they see isn't good. The King of Israel is only too keen to kill them all. He asks Elisha, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?" But Elisha reminds the king that he wouldn't normally treat prisoners of war that way. Instead, he orders that they be given a good feed and they're sent home, back to their master. God gives his people respite.

And I wonder

At an army of God, horses and chariots of fire standing ready to protect God's servant.

I wonder that there are things I don't see, a protective force, the power of God in times of trouble.

I wonder at Jesus telling his disciple to put his sword away and asking, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" And yet he went to the cross to suffer and die.

I wonder that God would step in, when the Aramean army surrounded Elisha, not just to save but to open the servant's eyes and reveal something of himself and his ways.

I wonder at Jesus, granting vision to a man born blind, and his depiction of the hard-hearted sceptics as having been struck by blindness.

I wonder at the slow unfolding of the disciples' vision of who Jesus really was. I wonder at the process of revelation that God does in our lives, how the prophetic vision throws light on the saving work of God, constantly enriching and transforming our lives.

---

In the third story, it's the prophetic word that inspires a sense wonder.

Once again, the Arameans come to disrupt the peace, and they do a really good job of it this time. Ben-Hadad has mobilised his entire army. They've laid siege to Samaria and now the people are starving. And it's horrible. You have to pay through the nose to afford a handful of seedpods. You have to beg, borrow and steal and raid your savings to be able to put a donkey's head on the dinner table. It's bad.

It's so bad that two women strike a deal. They both have sons. They will kill, cook and eat their sons, one at a time. The first woman fulfils her side of the bargain. The second woman hides her son.

The first woman cries out to the king, as he walks by on his daily circuit of the city wall, "Help me, my lord the King!"

But this king's got nothing to give, he hasn't even heard this woman's story yet but, even at this early stage of the conversation, his sarcastic response is telling, "If the Lord does not help you, where can I get help for you? From the threshing floor? From the winepress?"

And once the woman explains the nightmare she can't wake from, the king loses it. He tears his robes, the rough and worn-out edges of his state of mind are exposed and he cries out, "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat remains on his shoulders today."

You know, there was a time when you might expect a little more from the leader of God's people. This horrible story of the two women reminds us a little of a similar dilemma that two mothers brought to King Solomon. King Solomon was a man of wisdom and was able to administer justice. There was a time when God's people were led by a strategic warrior, King David, who consciously depended on God for strength and tactical insight, and it demonstrated that The LORD is a God who rescues his people.

But we don't have King David here. We don't have King Solomon here. We have a shell of a man, ragged and frayed. A man, crying out in rage for the head of God's messenger. A man, whose dark perspective on God's involvement in these events leads him to the dark conclusion, in chapter 6 verse 33, that, "This disaster is from the LORD, Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?"

Right now, in the story we've only heard the words of the hapless king and the words of the tragic mother. But now God is going to speak. Elisha announces that tomorrow, there will be an abundance, "a seah of flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria."

The officer accompanying the king is a little bit sceptical, "Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?"

To this Elisha speaks another prophetic word, "You will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat any of it."

And we know how the rest of the story goes,

Four lepers camped at the city gates decide they might as well take a risk and surrender to the Aramean army, what have they got to lose? They're going to die anyway.

So, when it's dark enough to conceal their approach, they head to the Aramean camp and they find no one. They find food and drink and they start to grab stuff, silver, gold, clothes, and they head off and hide them. You can imagine them giggling and carrying on, and then it hits them, "hang on a second, I don't think this is a secret we're going to be able to keep....we'd better tell someone...this is actually really good news.

But In typical fashion, the King of Israel is pessimistic— despite the fact that Elisha had promised the dawning new, bountiful day. In his dark, depressive state of mind, he thinks, "Oh no! It's a trap, they're just waiting for us to come out so they can take the city. But someone convinces him to send some scouts out, probably to die.

It turns out that, unbeknown to the Israelites, that army of fiery chariots and horses that God had revealed to Elisha and his servant in the last story, they'd paid a visit to the Aramean military camp and it scared the living daylights out of them. They heard the sound of horses and chariots and a great army and concluded that the Israelite king had hired foreign armies to come and attack them. And they ran.

When the Israelite scouts on horseback went out to find out what was going on, all they could find was clothing and equipment, strewn along the road to the river as the Aramean army fled in their panic.

And like that, there was safety and the famine was over. It turns out God did have the power to open the floodgates of heaven and bring abundance. The prophetic word of Elisha was proved true, there was abundance once more at the city gate and, unfortunately for the poor officer who doubted the word of God, Elisha's second prediction was fulfilled as well, he saw the event with his own eyes but was never able to enjoy it because he died in a stampede of hungry and elated people.

I wonder at a God who can make such audacious claims, and a God who delivers.

In contrast to the poor officer, whose doubt that God could do the seemingly impossible came to define his story, I wonder at disbelieving Sarah, who laughed when she overheard God say that she would have a child in her old age. I wonder, when God confronted her with her disbelief, and asked, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?", that Sarah would try to deceive God and insist that she didn't laugh. I wonder that God would persevere with Sarah and with Abraham, who tended to take matters into his own hands, that Abraham would name his son Isaac, meaning, "he laughs" and that Sarah would be able to declare, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." She went on to say, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?" Well God said it!

I wonder why we ever doubt his word.

I wonder, here in 2 Kings, in the midst of a failing state - the Northern kingdom of Israel, doomed to defeat, as they walk further and further from the LORD, worshiping foreign gods and persisting with their powerless caricatures of the one true God – that God would persevere with them. That he would still stoop, in his persistent benevolence, to reveal himself and to save.

I wonder that God would persevere with us, a persistently wayward humanity, a culture increasingly hostile to divine authority. I wonder that we still catch glimpses of his imminence. That peace, love,

justice and hope persist. I wonder that an abundance of goodness overflows to people so inclined to doing wrong. And I wonder that, in an eclipse all his other displays of benevolent imminence, God would send his son to save a world so ready to reject him. I wonder that God would stoop so low, to speak so clearly, to provide such a clear vision of his saving and transforming purposes.

As I sit with these stories, of Elisha, and of the works of God, so long ago, I wonder that we can find a fresh perspective for our lives today. The ministry of the prophets has always had a way of reframing perspectives, bringing hope and transformation.

This was the case for the characters in our stories. God reframed their perspectives, he brought hope and transformation.

And it did the same thing for God's people living exile. The prophetic ministry reshaped patterns of remembering and patterns of expectation, it inspired a resurgent devotion and a messianic hope.

As Christians we look back and witness, with a renewed sense of clarity, the fulfilment of the prophetic deeds, prophetic vision and prophetic word in the ministry of Jesus, the wonderful saving work of Jesus

And, just as the ministry of the prophets clarifies our vision looking back, it reshapes our vision as we look around and forward in wonder. We look with a hopeful expectation that God is still at work in his world and still has plans beyond our wildest imaginations.

So, let yourself wonder, an innocent, and perhaps naïve wonder at what was, and what is and what is to come. Don't develop a blind naivety that sits with your fingers in your ears and ignores the realities of the world around you. Don't develop and unthinking naivety will believes anything and everything. But break free of all the cynicism and doubt welcome an innocent naivety that isn't afraid to acknowledge and revel in the work of God in his world. Let the prophetic ministry of Elisha remind you that God is here, with power to save, and with a word that fills the nooks and crannies of your story with a most satisfying significance and a transforming hope.

let the wonder of the prophetic deeds of the Lord reassure you of his benevolent and saving presence.

Let the wonder of his prophetic vision reframe your perspective and transform your outlook.

And Let the wonder of his prophetic word bring you assurance and hope.