

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The event that the Spirit has revealed 揭示 and preserved 保存 for us today, in light of the greater narrative 叙述, seems odd and even unimportant. Sandwiched between the great and wonderful healing of Naaman and the remarkable and dramatic story of the Lord's defeat of Syria with Elisha the conqueror powerful in prayer is this odd little interlude 插曲 about a floating axe-head. Commentaries 评论 deal with the grammar and give us some historical information here and there. We are told that this story is much more powerful to the people of that day and age and it is for that reason that we must pay attention to the context if we are to understand.

Yet the story has drawn some remarkable commentary. Dr. Ian Hamilton speaks of a commentator who tells us that in those days an axe head was kept lubricated 润滑 with oil, but also oil caused the axe head to swell 膨胀 so that it remained firm on the handle. Oil in the Old Testament is the symbol of the Holy Spirit and just as this servant had not lubricated his axe head with oil and so it was lost so we too need to be anointed with the Holy Spirit or we cannot become servants of God. This kind of allegory, or spiritualizing of the text can seem amazing but it turns the real historical event which by the Spirit is to reveal to us God into a fable 寓言 with some sort of moral 道德 tacked 跟随 on. This kind of exposition really misses the point.

So we want to ask the question, "What is God doing and what is being revealed about God in this text that speaks to us today? What does the Holy Spirit want us to learn? What is the Spirit saying to the churches?" So we work and grapple 扭打 with a text that does seem just a little vague and to some even odd and believing that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us.

I bring to you the Word of the Lord under the theme:

The Lord Takes Care of His Servant, the Son of the Prophets: The LORD'S

1. Sovereignty 2. Abiding 不变的 Presence 存在 3. Salvation Providence

Our attention is once more focused on this curious "school of" or "sons of the prophets." The NIV calls it here, "the company of the prophets." We meet them first in the days of Samuel but after it seems they "died out". There is a general consensus that we do not really know exactly what they do or what purpose that they serve. They do not seem to have an authority to preach or bring God's Word, in general, the way that Samuel, Elijah or Elisha did. Elijah seems rather ambivalent 矛盾 to them and Elisha here at least seems to have fellowship with them. We are not sure if Elisha taught them but it does seem here that they considered Elisha their leader and looked to him for advice.

Whatever the case, it does seem as if the gathering of these men had grown so large that they needed larger quarters and that is the first bit of information that is interesting.

We recall that we are in the days of King Joram. The height of the wickedness that prevailed in the days Ahab and Jezebel had certainly left their influence on the Northern tribes. Though our Father in heaven had again and again confronted his children with famine, drought, pestilence and sword they refused to heed the call. The church in Israel was crumbling. 摇摇欲坠 Israel's theocracy 神权政治¹ was failing because they refused to give the LORD King in Israel, his due service and rights. We recall it was not all that long ago from the time of this story that the company of prophets was targeted by Jezebel in her satanic 撒旦 fury 怒火 and her hatred of God. Obadiah hid 100 of them. But even after the Lord's masterful defeat of Baal the prophets were all the more pursued and hated. To be a prophet in the land was from a human perspective a rather unenviable task. The prophets cried out against the injustice, the wickedness and called the Kings and people back to the covenant. This of

¹Literally from the Greek- "God's rule or power": the idea that God not Joram is really to be King

course had marginalized 边缘化 them and likely they were considered a rather odd group even as the godly are in and outside the church today.

Still, there they were: a beacon of light 灯标 shining in the darkness. Jezebel had been unable to destroy this remnant of faithfulness. How else can we explain except that God was keeping His promise as we read it in Genesis 3:15, that the Seed of serpent cannot overcome the Seed of the woman? The Psalmist writes and we sing, "If the Lord is for us who can be against us!" Paul writes and we rejoice, "In all things we are more than conquerors!"

See the battle continues to rage 肆虐 on and those fellows, these sons of the prophets have basically given up a normal way of life to serve the Lord. The writer of Kings has given us the story about the deceased son of the prophets whose wife was in dire 吓人的 distress because his financial burdens had left her destitute. 穷困者 Israel had forsaken her God given duty to take care of the widow and orphan. The LORD the real King intervened and the oil filled every jar, she could pay off her debts and there was enough money left over to live from. God is like that. He takes care of those little day to day things. He is not like our leaders who tell us what they are all going to do for us and in fact cannot. God cares, God can and God does. Have you ever heard the little song based on Jesus words,

*God sees the little sparrow fall, it meets his tender view;
If God so loves the little birds, I know he loves me too.*

The group had grown by God's grace and power. Men were coming and dedicated their life to the service of the Holy One. Right there in the realm of darkness a light is shining! (Just like it is happening in China and Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan and like it is happening here in Canada!) They asked Elisha if they could go to the Jordan and cut down a pole or beam. Elisha told them to go. They asked Elisha to come with and he did. Perhaps they were in Gilgal, or maybe Jericho, it is not so important. But while they were cutting down a tree one of the sons of the prophets watched in horror as his axe head flew off the handle and sunk in the Jordan River.

He was beside himself. Hard for us to understand isn't it? We would head to the hardware store and pick up another one. But this is the early part of the Iron Age. Men are just learning to use and shape iron. To have an axe head was a big deal! And the son of the prophet had borrowed it. In the Hebrew it says, "He begged it." It took some pleading by the son of the prophet to get the owner to lend it to him. Now it was lost and this man was looking at a time of servitude 奴役 to pay it off, maybe even twice. He was a son of the prophet, he was poor. The excitement of the new building had turned into a night mare.

But our God is a powerful God. Our God cares, He can and He does take care of the little things. Elisha showed that compassion. He does not brush the man off but he will help. "Where did it fall in?" he asks. Elisha sees, cuts a stick and throws it into the Jordan. And as one commentator puts it, the axe head swam!

God was there protecting, using His power over the laws of gravity to ensure the protection of His servants. We too can rest in that care. We live lives that bring us to the brink of uncertainty and even panic. Troubles come and then the Lord comes with His might. Then the children of God can sing with the son of the prophet: I know He loves me too! We need to dig deeper though.

The Abiding Presence of God Another interesting aspect of this story is the activity of Elisha. As we have noted it is clear that the sons of the prophets looked up to Elisha and that he seemed much more involved with these men. What is interesting first of all is that they ask Elisha for his advice and that they see him as an authority. There is that recognition in the

faithful of the position of Elisha. There is an honouring of the office. This stands in complete contradistinction对比 of the people of Israel. We recall the derision and the insults of the now dead youth of Bethel. We recall the hatred of Jezebel and the scorn of Ahaziah. But there in the rebellion we see the abiding presence of God who works through the faithful so that the little group of men is the place where we can see the grace and power of God expressed in the respect of these men for Elisha.

We have noted that it pleased God to use Elisha in marvellous奇妙 ways. By respecting and showing honour to Elisha, the men are in fact honouring God! That in time was blessed as the numbers grew and the blessings of God are with these men despite what for us might seem a harsh and marginalized life. But the communion of the saints there is a testimony that God is in the land.

When they ask Elisha to go with them he does go. They understand the importance of his presence. They do need Elisha to cut a pole will nor will he likely aid their building project. There is rather a sense of love and a desire for his presence. There is a desire for the blessing of God. And in keeping with our first point we see the directing hand of God. Something is going to happen. Something marvellous is going to happen, but God working through and with his faithful directs the events of the revelation of His goodness.

Here then we see Elisha in parallel with Christ. Elisha is always less, but he points to the one greater. He will become smaller in time, his work will be finished, but now in His office he gives us taste of the Messiah, the anointed one, the great prophet Jesus Christ.² In Christ ultimately and wholly we find live in the abiding presence of God. The Father and the Son have sent the Spirit so that the body of Christ is God with us, and yet that is only because of Jesus' promise to be with us even to the close of the age. Wherever the body goes, wherever we go, it is because Christ is going and goes with us. Without Him and apart from Him we can do nothing! Because He goes with us we have no fear for we are comforted and strengthened in the abiding presence of God.

Elisha goes with the faithful pointing us to Christ who goes with the faithful and is with them even to the close of the age! We live out of honour, love and respect for Christ our sender and our prophet and in him and through Him we experience grace and live out of graciousness in humbleness and obedience. We pray that He will abide with us in life and in death!

Now when the man loses his axe head and he is forlorn, Elisha is there. There is that wonderful working of God. Elisha goes with him, throws in the stick and miracles happen. The axe head swims. To be in the abiding presence of God take on new and richer meaning. This God who is with us is for us and He can do amazing things for us. Yes an axe head floats but what is that when we think of a creation from nothing, when we think of his providential care and sovereignty, when we think of the incarnation and the resurrection and the glory that waits for us. We are amazed but surprised that an axe floats! We live in the presence of this great and glorious God and we understand that there is nothing to great for Him to do. And so we rest in him and the prophet Jesus Christ and we sing: Great is Thy faithfulness.

Yes this Great and glorious God has saved and sends His blessings. And that then leads us to our final point.

The Lord's Salvation We have touched on this earlier but now we want to go just a little deeper. When that axe head fell in the water, all was lost for that son of the prophet. There was no way he was going to fashion another axe head. There was no way he had the money for such

²See John 3:30 where John the Baptist says: He must become greater; I must become less.

an item otherwise he would not have to have begged it. He stood in the position of utter helplessness! There was nothing his hands could have done to save him from this situation. Still there was hope. Elisha was there. Elisha had been part of the saving the widow from a life of servitude and her children. Elisha was there and that meant they were in the presence of God. So he goes with his dilemma to servant of God.

Again we see that Elisha, like Elijah does much more than the prophetic office. He is also in many ways a mediator between God and man. In that he reminds us of the work of the priests who led in worship, in the sacrifices and the petition on behalf of God's people. The sons of the prophet see Elisha that way and then once more we get a glimpse of the revelation of Christ, the new Adam, the anointed one in whom all the offices are fulfilled and renewed. We recall that baptism teaches us also whereby we are sprinkled with the Holy Spirit and that we are called to confess the Lord our God, live for Him and join in that universal battle of the enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.

The man went to Elisha in despair and Elisha went with him to retrieve the axe head. It was not simply so that the man could head on back and chop down and hew his beam for the new log house they were going to build. Elisha was used by God to show that our God is a saving God! Elisha is used by God to bring redemption in what would have otherwise been an impossible situation.

We sing it together, "Not what my hands have done can save my guilty soul." There is nothing we can do to save our guilt souls. We stand as helpless as the son of the prophet. What hope is there for us? The debt is too great. Yet there is for us hope! We too have a prophet who like a priest will intercede for us. Our God will send salvation! God cares and He can and He does.

Our God sent His son to us, to go with us to become like one of us. There it is again that amazing grace of God who sent His son to pay the penalty of our sin. Our God sent His son to die on the cross to what was for us impossible. The mediator came to provide a better covenant and bring reconciliation. The God who takes care of the axe head to save a servant from trial and trouble has sent His Son to save us from eternal trials and struggles. God has given His son and as baptism teaches us; His blood cleanses us from all of our sins. And so we respond in faith and faithfulness loving this one God and Father of Jesus Christ who is now our father in heaven, who delights in all who confess His name.

Keil and Delitzsch in their commentary on the Old Testament from this passage direct our attention to the words of Jesus:

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

That is why this text here—that we may know the compassion and nearness of our God. This passage reveals a God who takes pleasure in His servants and watches over even the smallest minutia of our life. Yes this past month has brought shock and sorrow and this past week too has brought to mind the frailty of life. Yet if we will run to God He will abide with us through His Son and He will provide salvation. So we can, we must and we do sing:

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!*

Great Is Thy Faithfulness, Lord unto Me.

Yes a long time ago the LORD with Elisha made an axe head float. A group of men were serving God there in the midst of darkness and one of their own tasted the salvation of the Lord. Great is the Faithfulness of God! This is our story and this is our song!

Amen.