



Pastor Michael O'Neill
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A TESTIMONY TO OTHERWISE

2 Kings 4:8-37

1. Sees the World as Whole, not Divided

2. Sees Hope in God, not Connections

3. Sees Options are Limitless, not Limited

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Kings and Presidents
A Testimony to Otherwise^{1, 2}
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My, oh my, oh my. So the latest is that Hillary is being reinvestigated by the FBI, and even MSNBC is disgusted by the Clinton Foundation's massive grifting. Meanwhile, Donald continues to complain that the election is rigged (just in case he loses) and his trolls threaten violence against anyone who disagrees with him. It all makes you wonder if the whole system isn't corrupt. Many folks know for sure that they don't want their opponent to win on the one hand, but on the other, they are not even all that excited if their *own* party wins.

What if a faithful approach to politics isn't about whose candidate will win? What if God is asking us to be citizens of the Kingdom that has real implications for our neighborhoods and real hope for our country, but is not determined by popular votes?

We are in part three of a four part sermon series called "Kings and Presidents," a series on being Kingdom people in our world of politics. We will finish this series next Sunday before Election Day, and it's our prayer that you will approach the polls with a Kingdom perspective.

I'll remind you also that I do not feel it is my responsibility to tell you who to vote for, only to tell you *whom to live for*. And I trust that Jesus Christ – the One you live for – will inform you through his Holy Spirit how you should vote – and vote you should. In "Kings and Presidents," we want to gain perspective and direction by looking at examples from the history of God's people, Israel.

First, we saw Joshua's encounter with his own Commander in Chief – God – right before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and moved into the Promised Land. God was reasserting his design that Israel would be a different people, and that their actions and their loyalties would be to God alone. The call of the people was to remain faithful to their covenant with God by obeying the commands of the Torah, or the Law.

Last week we saw the problems presented when the people of Israel decided to abandon God's design and instead wanted to have a king, like the nations around them. God allowed their choice, but they had to live with the consequences. So even though Israel had a few good kings throughout their history (actually, only one was really great, and even he failed miserably), Israel's desire for a king led to the eventual division of the kingdom and then the exile, as Israel was conquered and taken off into Babylonian captivity.

Today I want us to look at a story during Israel's time of kings that teaches us to view politics from a different perspective – a kingdom perspective. In the books of first and second Kings we see that there were some people who learned to live in the Kingdom of God while being in the

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Testimony to Otherwise: The Witness of Elijah and Elisha* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 27.

² Much of the influence of this message comes from: Timothy R. and Shawna Songer Gaines, *Kings and Presidents* (Kansas City, Beacon Hill Press, 2015), 59-78.

midst of kings. We will learn it today from the life of a Shunammite woman. She was able to see life from a set of options that was invisible to those who relied on kings, presidents, and politics. The story starts with the prophet Elisha, and it says this:

One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us."

One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite." So he called her, and she stood before him. Elisha said to him, "Tell her, 'You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?'" She replied, "I have a home among my own people."

"What can be done for her?" Elisha asked. Gehazi said, "She has no son, and her husband is old." Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms." "No, my lord!" she objected. "Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant!" But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her. The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. He said to his father, "My head! My head!"

His father told a servant, "Carry him to his mother." After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.

She called her husband and said, "Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return." "Why go to him today?" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath." "That's all right," she said. She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you." So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, "Look! There's the Shunammite! Run to meet her and ask her, 'Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?'"

"Everything is all right," she said.

When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, "Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me why."

"Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes?'"

Elisha said to Gehazi, "Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. Don't greet anyone you meet, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy's face."

But the child's mother said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So he got up and followed her.

Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, "The boy has not awakened."

When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the Lord. Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out. (2 Kings 4:8-37, niv)

This is a very interesting story – amazing and inspiring and miraculous, and you might rightly wonder what it has to do with politics and election season; you might be surprised.

The principle players in this story are Elisha, the Shunammite woman whose name we are not given, and of course God. Secondary players are her husband, her son, and Elisha's assistant.

We are told from this story that the woman is a person of some means; her husband evidently has money. But her provision is about to run out; her husband is an older man, and they do not have a son. In those days, a woman without a husband or a son would have no means to provide for herself. That culture did not allow women to support themselves and meet their needs for everyday life.

We also get an indication that this woman is able to see things that others are not attuned to. When she sees Elisha passing through, she recognizes him as a man of God; a holy man. There isn't anything in the passage that tells us he is wearing something that would identify him as a prophet. He's not wearing a nametag that says, "Hi. I'm Elisha, the prophet." And yet she can see and sense that he is close to God. She has a spiritual sense that allows her to see things that others cannot; she see things *rightly* – the way all of us ought to. Others might have seen Elisha as a drifter, or a political operative, or even a crazy man, but she saw a man of God.

While others are not attuned to spiritual activity, she is. While others have relegated God to religion, she is aware of God in the midst of her everyday life.

This is the first distinction. She:

1. Sees the ***World*** as ***Whole***, not ***Divided***

Most people divide the world between the spiritual stuff with God and the real stuff with the world, and each stay in their own areas. Even her husband has divided the world. We know this because later in the story, when she tells him that she needs to go see the prophet, he essentially says, "Why? It's not Sunday so that you need to go to church. It's not a special church holiday when anyone would normally go see a prophet or a pastor." Like most people, he has divided his world into the religious or spiritual, and the "real" world. But she sees it all as the same world. She recognizes the spiritual in the midst of every day, and so she recognizes Elisha for who he is.

If we are going to approach the election polls correctly as Christians, we must not divide our worlds between church and politics. God is not outside our world, watching and guiding from a distance. Right now you and I are in *God's world*. We don't invite him into our world; it is *entirely* his world and he lets us live in it. We must not see the world as divided.

Many of you know that I was pastor at a church in a small town called Mountain Home, Idaho before coming here. I don't expect you to know where that is, and most of you have never been near it unless you are driving to places like Sun Valley, Idaho or Salt Lake City, Utah. That's because Interstate 84 skirts along the northern edge of the small town, and it's where you turn off to go skiing at Sun Valley, or you go right past it on your way to Utah. Other than that, there's no reason to stop in Mountain Home – unless, of course, you've been in the Air Force. There is an Air Force base just outside of town with around 5-6 thousand airmen and women, and there are barely that many more people in the town of Mountain Home. Being a pastor in a small military town has a lot of unique things about it. We had a church of around 300 people, and every 2-3 years we had a turnover of about a third of our church. Every couple of years 100 or so people would be relocated and another 100 or so would be relocated there. We should have installed revolving doors on the front of the church. You had to make friends in a hurry. The nice thing was that if we made some kind of change in the way we did things in the church, within a few years pretty much everyone thought you'd always done things that way. Of course, every time there was a change in a presidential administration, the philosophy of the military would change and planes and people would move in and out, numbers of people would go up and down, and there was always the fear of the base closing altogether.

I learned a lot about military life there. And one of the things I learned was how easy it is to compartmentalize our lives. I saw that in the lives of many military personnel. Here's what I mean: they had a phrase that said, "What happens TDY, stays TDY." Similar to what people say about their visits to Las Vegas. TDY means "Temporary Duty," and it's what happens when a soldier is temporarily assigned somewhere else in the world for any amount of time from a month to just less than two years. That means that the soldier has to go alone; they can't take their family with them. So they developed this philosophy that said, "Whatever you have to do to maintain your morale while on TDY is excusable." So in extreme examples, if you thought you needed to have an affair to maintain your morale and do your job, so be it. And the code was that no one would tell on anyone else. I'm not saying that all soldiers lived by that, but far too many did.

Even if they didn't go to that extreme, many soldiers compartmentalized their lives. It was like they had an Air Force "box" and a family "box" and a church "box." And it was okay if you acted *one way* in your church box, but then acted entirely differently in your Air Force box. For many of them, the ethics they lived by were only for that particular box and far different in each box.

Now I understand that this kind of compartmentalization was probably necessary to some degree, especially if a soldier had been in a war zone and had seen and done some horrible things. I've counseled many of those soldiers returning from war, and some of that compartmentalization is necessary to survive emotionally. But in our everyday lives it is an unhealthy way to live.

It's not just soldiers that do that, is it? As Christians, we can be guilty of this, too. We justify our behavior or attitudes in *one* place and act completely different in another. Anytime we act in ways that are contradictory we are being hypocritical. As Christians, our entire lives are

supposed to be the Jesus Box – everything goes in that box and we are to live consistently as followers of Jesus in *every* area of our lives.

So regarding the conversation at hand this morning, I wonder if we are approaching these elections from that kind of compartmentalization – as if there are two worlds. We have separated the world of politics from the world of faith. Sure, we vote, expecting it to count. Or we don't vote because we don't think it matters. Either way, we approach it as two different worlds. In our minds what happens at the polls and in our halls of government is separate from what happens in our churches and Bibles. We pretty much leave God out of it. We might not say we believe that, but we sure behave like that. After all, it's the separation of church and state, right?

Here's the point I'm trying to make church: if we are going to read the Bible correctly, and live as Christians in this world correctly, we've got to look at the upcoming elections from a *Kingdom* perspective. We need to see that God is involved in all of this, and we need to be able to see beyond what this world considers real facts and see that God is at work in this world because it is his. And we need to welcome his work in this world and pray and seek to carry it out. Like the Shunammite woman, we need to see the world as a whole, not divided. Pray. Seek God's direction as you cast your ballot. Don't assume you are right, or that your party is right. Pray about it. Meet with others this Wednesday night for prayer in our prayer room (it's the last time before the election!).

So back to the story, in return for *her* kindness, Elisha offers her a gesture of kindness, from which we realize that the Shunammite woman...

2. Sees Hope in God, not Connections

Let me explain what I mean by that: The Shunammite woman not only sees that Elisha is a man of God, she acts on what she sees: she offers Elisha a meal whenever he comes through town, and then builds a room in their house so that he will always have a place to stay, rest, and pray. There is absolutely nothing in the language that would tell us that she is doing any of this in order to get a favor from Elisha. She doesn't do this in order to get anything from him; she does it out of sheer, genuine, and generous hospitality. Nevertheless, Elisha wants to return the favor and offers a gesture to her. He can do that; he has connections. At this point in his life, Elisha is an advisor to the king and to generals. So he asks the woman if he can put in a good word for her with the king or the generals – with those in power. He is connected; he has the ear of political leaders and they listen to him. A recommendation from him would go a long way.

You might wonder what kind of favor would Elisha ask on her behalf? Well, he knows her husband is getting old, and he knows that she doesn't have a son. Perhaps the king would set aside some money for her. Maybe he could get the generals to look out for her. The original language indicates that it leaves open the possibility that Elisha could ask the king if he would take her into his palace as one of his wives.

This is an interesting request that Elisha the man of God is willing to make – to ask a favor of the king, because this king, whose name is Joram, is *not* a good guy. In the previous chapter (2 Kings 3:2) we're told that Joram did evil in the eyes of the Lord. So it could be that, even though Elisha currently has the ear of the king, he could be testing the woman to see what she says; we don't really know for sure.

But her answer tells us that she wasn't willing to put her hope in kings. In response to Elisha's offer, she says, "I have a home among my people." (2 Kings 4:13) Now that seems like a strange response; after all, she is already a citizen of Israel under King Joram. So her reply sounds like she sees some kind of difference or distance or disconnect between her people and King Joram's people, and she doesn't see herself as one of King Joram's people. Without saying anything bad about the king, she seems to be saying that she is a part of a kingdom that is different than the world of political powers.

One author states it this way: "She is offered the category of the given political world. She is offered the chance to cozy up to power for her own benefit, something that isn't strange or out of place in the given world of kings. But she sees another way... (she sees) reality – God, world, self – in alternative ways outside conventional, commonly accepted givens."³

The ability to see reality differently – putting hope in God instead of politically powerful connections – is what it means to live in the Kingdom of God. She didn't need to rely on any special connections to the king. Her hope was in God. That's a challenge to any of us who have a political vision of the world as it is seen around us today. We think our *only* hope is if our candidate wins. We take this political world we live in for granted and think that's just the way it is – we've got two choices to choose from. We might have a third party, but no one ever really sees that as a viable alternative (although it would be nice if it was!). So we put our hope in presidents. But this woman challenges the logic of the way the world operates. This world relies on votes and dollars and power and control. She relies on God. While our world is busy trying to create structures and systems that will give us power and control, she rests in the Creator. Instead of attempting to control her circumstances by accepting the offer of connections with the king, she trusts in what can't be seen – in God's ability to control. While the world is categorized into winners and losers, she trusts in the one who is on everyone's side.

According to the world's logic, this woman's rejection of a connection to power has condemned her to a life of poverty and homelessness. As soon as her husband dies, she'll lose everything. Logic dictates that only the king can save her because he has all the power and she will have none. "This is a woman who sees (in Elisha) a holy man of God, rather than a politically connected operative, a woman who has hope in the world of the kingdom rather in the king's power."⁴

We can learn from this woman that our hope is not in this election, or even the *next* election if our guy or gal loses. Our hope has nothing to do with whether or not the person we choose is in power, whether our side wins or loses. Because we have a value system and a certain hope that trusts in God, not in our political parties or connections.

Her hope is in God. So it is to God that Elisha goes on her behalf, and he tells her that within a year's time, she will be cradling her own newborn son.

Whenever God is involved, we can see, and she...

3. Sees Options are Limitless, not Limited

³ Gaines, "Kings and Presidents"

⁴ *ibid*

Who would ever think that a woman of advanced age, with a husband of advanced age, a couple who have not been able to conceive yet in all their years of marriage, would suddenly become pregnant?

Her initial response to Elisha is to make sure he is speaking for God. She essentially tells him, “Don’t you dare get my hopes up! Don’t you tell me this unless you mean it.”

We can relate to that, can’t we? We see the hopelessness of the current political situation. I mean, come on! Do you mean to tell me that there’s really no one better than these two people for president in all of our country? Sure there might be some other good independent candidates, but you know as well as I do that all those candidates are really doing is taking away votes from one of the big two – probably Trump. So honestly – is our system, the best in the history of the world; is our system really *that* broken? Many people feel it is hopelessly, irreparably broken.

And so here I am today telling you there is great hope, and you, like a barren, nearly widowed woman, you are saying “Really? You really think there is hope in this election? Don’t get my hopes up! Don’t tell me there’s hope unless you really mean it!”

But the Shunammite woman hopes against hope, and it happens just as God told her. I’m telling you: God sent his one and only son Jesus Christ into this world to redeem this world. Ever since his death and resurrection, he has been at work through the power of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the life of believers in this world to redeem this world – all people and creation. I am a believer. I didn’t grow up in the church. My parents weren’t Christian at the time that I became one. I am the son of a spiritually barren woman! I have been saved. I am proof of the promise. And so are you if you are a Christian.

But there are times that our hopes get terribly tried and tested. There are times when we really want to doubt. There are times when it appears there are limited options left.

The story tells us that this boy, probably at around the age of ten, just beginning to work in the fields, which means that soon he will be able to do what she needs most, and that’s provide for her – this boy has some kind of aneurism or something because he has a headache and dies. The Shunammite woman lays her son’s body on the prophet’s bed – not the boy’s bed and not her own bed – and charges off for Elisha. She knows where her hope lies – in the God of Elisha. And she won’t settle for anything else – not even Elisha’s servant, who tries to intervene.

She reminds Elisha that she warned him not to get her hopes up (who can resist saying “I told you so!”), but she never wavers in her certainty that with God there are limitless possibilities, even when everything appears so terribly limited. And God provides an answer that no king could offer. He brings her son back to life. In fact, there is a sense of playfulness in the story, as the boy sneezes seven times.

Let me tell you what’s likely to happen in this election with these two candidates (if nothing changes): If your person “wins,” something is going to happen to deflate your hope in that person (if that hasn’t happened already). They are going to do something, or some new revelation is going to come out, and it is going to make you wonder why you ever trusted that person. You will have gotten your hope up and then you will lose it again. The only solution to that is if you, like this old woman in the story, keep your faith in a God who provides limitless options, not these limited options that the election provides.

What would happen if we as Christians started living as if this is God’s world, as if our hope was entirely in him and not in any political connections – the God of limitless possibilities? What

would happen if Christians who believe in God's provision started giving what they had to their neighbor in need, or to their church, or to the Union Gospel Mission or Love INC or Madison House or Rod's House or the YWCA? What if Christians who were passionate about the national debt started getting their own debt under control? What if Christians who feel so strongly about who gets the votes, would feel even more strongly about their neighbor who doesn't have God? What if Jesus Christ was truly on the move in his world through our hearts and actions?

What if we lived as if this world was not the real world but God's world? "In the resurrection of Jesus, God breaks the power that suggests that physical reality has ultimate power over us. Christ has conquered death, the ultimate physical reality. It is real, yes, but it is no longer in a place of ultimate authority... (Look at the Shunammite woman). Rather than placing her hope in the world of kings, she places it in the world of the kingdom. Had she chosen another route, had she accepted Elisha's offer and hoped in what the king might be able to provide, history would probably have overlooked the Shunammite woman because she likely would have fallen into despair when her greatest hopes were not realized. But in a political sense, she places her hope in the world of the kingdom, in a God who remains faithful...in her witness, we find ourselves challenged to examine where we have placed our hope...if we can follow the faithful lead of a nameless woman through whom God wrote another chapter in the (salvation story), we may be able to see a political alternative, an "otherwise" that cannot be offered to us in the world of kings, and as we do..."⁵ we can walk into a world of limitless possibility as God redeems and restores people and even entire histories of nations.

Pray

⁵ *ibid*