



ALL THINGS NEW

FIRST EPISCOPAL DISTRICT BIBLE STUDY

DECEMBER 2017

December Theme: A New Birth

Written by Rev. Tabitha Ssonko

A New Word

Many desire the excitement of new life, but fear the pain of birth. God desires that our lives be driven by a living and mature hope that joins both the joyful expectation and the faithful struggle that bring about new birth.

A New Understanding

The Books of 1 & 2 Kings give an account of the reigns of Israel's monarchs from King David until the release of King Jehoiachin during the Babylonian exile. While history may seem at the center of this narrative, the greater story is a spiritual one in which Israel struggles to adhere to God's teaching. Its political leaders often followed foreign gods, such as Baal, and led the people to physical and spiritual ruin. Thus, the historical account of 1 & 2 Kings points to the degradation of relationship between God and God's beloved, and the consequences of falling away from relationship.

The figure of the prophet emerges from within this cohesive narrative as one who stands between the people and God, and between the people and the king to declare the Word of God that comes not only to convict those who follow other gods and do harm to God's people, but also as the representative of the miraculous. In 1 Kings, The prophet Elijah was foil to Ahab and Jezebel. In the midst of the famine, Elijah provided food to a dying widow and her son, and caused the destruction of the "prophets of Baal" (1 Kings 18). In 2 Kings, Elisha stands as the bearer of a "double portion" of the anointing God had placed on his mentor Elijah, which empowers him to call out the political and spiritual hypocrisy of rulers, and to offer God's people life and hope.

KEY VERSE

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

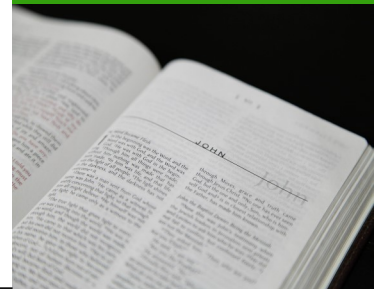
- 1 Peter 1:3

STUDY

PASSAGE

2 Kings

4:8-37



A New Understanding (continued)

2 Kings 4 offers a look into the hope-filled work of Elisha through four miracles which offer God's counter-narrative to Baal's supposed power over life and death. In our study passage, the story of the Shunammite woman forces us to deal with problems associated with class and social status. The woman has no expectations of Elisha as a leader, yet the leader still offers her a blessing for her willingness to be a blessing. She is offered a son to ensure the financial and social standing of her household, but when that son is taken away through sickness, God offers rebirth and renewed hope to remedy her standing and her spirit.

2 Kings 4:8-35

⁸ 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. ⁹ She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. ¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. ¹² He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite." So he called her, and she stood before him. ¹³ 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."

¹⁴ "What can be done for her?" Elisha asked. Gehazi said, "She has no son, and her husband is old." ¹⁵ Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. ¹⁶ "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!" ¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. ¹⁹ He said to his father, "My head! My head!" His father told a servant, "Carry him to his mother." ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.

²² 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." ²³ "Why go

to him today?" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath." "That's all right," she said. ²⁴ She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you."

²⁵ 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!" ²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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."

²⁸ "Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes?'"

²⁹ 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."

³⁰ 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.

³¹ 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."

³² When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. ³³ He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD.

³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.

The Old in the Text

1. Why does the Shunammite woman refuse the new blessing that Elisha offers? What old ways of thinking about new blessings do her responses reveal? See verses 13,16, 28.
2. After the woman's son died, she goes to Elisha, but he does not immediately respond to her personally. What old ways of thinking about new blessings do Elisha's actions reveal? How does Elisha deal with the pain that his "blessing" has caused? See verses 25-26, 29-30, 35.

The New in the Text

1. How is the Shunammite woman transformed in the story? Where do you see evidence of this change? How do her actions reveal a new hope, expectation, and way of thinking about new blessings?
2. Can you identify the ways in which Elisha has changed?
3. New birth is not automatic and without struggle. Identify the stages involved in bringing about new birth in this story.

A New Look

Bethel AME Church in Boston, MA is no stranger to political activism. But the mostly African American congregation has taken up a new mission. In late September, the parish decided to give shelter to a man from El Salvador facing deportation. "This is not a political issue. Ultimately it's a human issue," says [Pastor Ray] Hammond, who co-founded Bethel AME with his wife, Gloria White-Hammond, a fellow physician and pastor herself. The couple started the church in 1989. It has done work on various social justice issues, including with youth, prisoners and the impoverished.



"For a number of years, we've been concerned about the immigration crisis in our country," Hammond says. "We've been deeply concerned about the way in which the immigration issue — rather than being dealt with honestly, openly, justly, humanely — has become increasingly a political football." Hammond says he was a little surprised at how much support there was among congregants for taking this latest step. "I expected perhaps more opposition. Historically, sometimes there has been tension between the African American and Latino community, between what African Americans see as 'native-born' versus 'immigrant,'" Hammond says.

A couple members of the congregation expressed some doubts about giving shelter to someone at risk of being deported, Hammond adds. But that was about it. "The vote was almost unanimous to support it. And people certainly wanted to understand the protocols and how we're going to make sure that this work. But the support was overwhelming," Hammond says.

A New Look (continued)

Bethel AME is not acting alone. It's part of a coalition of three local churches and three synagogues, all contributing to the effort to provide sanctuary for the undocumented man from El Salvador. At least one other church in the Boston area has declared itself as a sanctuary. Religious leaders are busy working on what comes next. Last week, clergy from several different faith traditions met at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in downtown Boston to sing, pray and talk about how their communities might be willing to respond to what some see as a looming crackdown on immigration. People see this issue as a fight for the nation's soul, says Rev. Arrington Chambliss, a priest with Episcopal City Mission in Boston. "Words without action are empty," Chambliss says. "We're in a particular moment in our history," she adds. "There is a very pernicious and focused threat on particular communities." "It's not trying to be in conflict with anyone, but it's being instead in deep relationship with our neighbor."

[Excerpted from "A Black Church in Boston Says It's Called to be a Sanctuary" *October 17, 2017* (PRI.org) Photo: Pastor Ray Hammond (right), Rev. Mariama White-Hammond (center); Rabbi Victor Reinstein (left) of Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue—partners in sanctuary standing outside of Bethel AME Church in Boston, MA.]

A New Conversation

1. In what ways is new life being birthed in the story above?
2. Identify the different risks, struggles, and discomfort that the pursuit of new birth requires for the various parties involved?
3. What parallels do you see for the hope, the struggle, and the glory of new birth in the stories of our Study Passage, the New Look, and the birth of Jesus Christ?
4. What opportunities for participating in the ministry of new birth is God presenting to your congregation? What actions would it involve? What risks would be required of you?

Notes:

A New Walk

1. How have my expectations of new birth been based on God acting alone in a pain free way?
2. In what ways have I allowed fear of the unknown, fear of struggle, and/or fear of pain to prevent me from responding to God's offer of new birth in my life?
3. In what ways can I participate in bringing about change and new birth in my life, home, church and my community? How can I partner with others?