

Sermon Notes: February 14, 2021 **Focus:** Twice the power -Elisha and 5000 [All Readings](#)

Today, I have a two layered approach. I want to go deep into the prophets *Elijah* and *Elisha*. I have graphics on pages 3 and 4 that I hope will help give you visual context to our Old Testament reading today. Page 2 focuses on the “Birmingham 5000” aka The Children’s Crusade. I did not know about this civil rights action until this week, but it is a clear illustration of collective, prophetic power to change broken ways of living. This movement was connected to Elijah’s dream of a just world where God is in charge and mercy is king.

Elijah and Elisha It is so easy to get lost in the Bible. It can be especially challenging in the historical narratives like 1st and 2nd Kings. 1st Kings is largely about King Solomon and his terrible son (Solomon was an objectively horrible person -- change my mind!). Solomon and Son’s heavy taxation paired with an authoritarian, enslaving rule split the “United Kingdom” of the Old Testament into two diminished territories: The Northern (Israel) and Southern Kingdoms (Judah).

By the time we get to 2nd Kings (today’s reading), Ahaziah, the Northern king, reigns over a severely weakened Israel and he rules from Samaria (see map below). Ahaziah’s actual physical infirmities are iconic of the northern kingdom’s overall frailty. If we fast forward through the historical text, after Ahaziah, eleven terrible Northern rulers follow. The last independent(ish) ruler of the North, Hoshea, is booted out by the foreign Assyrian military machine.

That is a lot of context to say that the prophet Elijah is big deal. He is bigger than the despotic kings he curses and topples. Elijah is a perpetual thorn to a parade of leaders. He takes out the thieves and murders like [Ahab and Jezebel along with the priests of Baal](#) (1 Kings 18). Elijah blesses widows and raises the dead. In today’s reading, he stops Ahaziah from getting a magical cure from the temple in Ekron (not Jewish). As you will see in the graphics below, this king sent couriers to Ekron that Elijah stopped midway.

Upon the King’s orders, 2 divisions of soldiers of 50 each went directly Elijah to get him to stop his agitating. But he calls fire down on these 100 men. Elijah would only go to see the King after the third division of soldiers begged for their lives. Elijah went willingly with the final 50 to see Ahaziah where he would curse this weakening king to death.

In 2nd Kings, Elijah is nearing the end of a long a career and has identified his successor *Elisha*. After cursing the king, Elijah, the mentor, takes he mentee, *Elisha*, across the Jordan where Elijah would write the script for the 1981 movie “Chariots of Fire.” Seriously, Elijah is taken up into the sky on a fiery chariot, never to be seen again, and passes his prophetic mantle (a cloak) onto Elisha with double the prophetic mojo. Taking the baton, Elisha will bless, curse, heal, shake, rattle and roll his way through Jericho and beyond.

The two prophets and the Birmingham 5000. I want to share a little-known protest (at least to me) from 1963. It is modern icon of prophetic action. Elijah and Elisha stood up to thieving and weakling Kings for the sake of widows and children. 5000 members of the Children’s Crusade were standing up for all black people in Birmingham and the US, both current and other children as yet unborn.

Birmingham was ground zero of racial tensions during JFK’s presidential term. Birmingham is where MLK would face a humiliating setback. No one would join him in the streets of Birmingham to protest the unfair treatment of its black citizens. He was thrown into solitary and wrote *letters from a Birmingham jail*. He was released with little fanfare and came back

to his family, broken by experience. In my opinion, he would have stayed broken without the unsolicited help of radio DJ's and school kids.

5000 students and a motley collection of DJ's like Shelley "The Playboy" Stewart revived the movement for civil rights in Alabama. Historically, we know it as the [Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963](#). If you want to spend 40 minutes on a video, there is an interesting [documentary of this movement](#). I found it to be a (nearly) perfect expression of children's activism that both MLK and Malcolm X initially opposed. 4-year-olds to HS seniors flooded into Birmingham to "parade without a license." They knew; they expected; they wanted to be arrested so that they could expose the racial apartheid they were under. Their sheer numbers would break the prison system by overwhelming it. 50 kids at a time, they walked down the steps of the 16th street Baptist church where they would be greeted by hoses, dogs, and a tank symbolically painted white before being arrested and detained.

It was organized heavily by DJs. Big Joe Turner's song "Shake, Rattle and Roll" was a coded call to action that would cue people to organize. DJ comments on air like *Bring your toothbrush. You ought to brush your teeth* told kids to prepare for a night in jail. The KKK of 1963 Birmingham knew something was afoot on the radio, but as soon as they cut down a radio tower, other DJ's would step in to organize the kids. The Children's Crusade launched from the 16th street Baptist Church. Later the church was seen as high value target for the Klan. On September 15, 1963 four youth: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Carol Denise McNair were killed by domestic terrorists who planted 19 sticks of dynamite under the eastern steps of the sanctuary.

This might seem unusual, but it was an evolution of the underground railroad that preceded them. For example, you might love the church song "Wade in the Water." Did you know in the south it was meant to communicate that a slave was preparing to flee via the river? The plantation singing would jump from farm to farm telling slaves miles away to "Get ready to help your brothers and sisters tonight because they are escaping" the fleeing person would "wade in the water" and these coded songs went right over the plantation overseers' heads who just thought the workers were trying to sing to occupy their time.

We need individuals to stand in for collective action to make sense of the history. Maybe this is too strong, but I think MLK would have been a historical footnote without the courage of literally thousands of youth making a choice to not be afraid. These kids would not be stopped. Too young to vote, 5000 people forced the national spotlight to land so brightly on Alabama that even JFK could not politely ignore it. Even as many of the youths' parents forbade them from heading to 16th Street (out of fear), the kids did it anyway.

MLK resisted the Children's Crusade (until he didn't). Unlike Elisha who returned with twice of Elijah's spirit to Jericho, civil right leaders like MLK were lifted up with 5000 times the power from these children who refused fear. I can't imagine letting my kids knowingly enter the jaws of a lion, but these youth's courage encourages me. Their transfiguring power is straight up biblical. Their bravery toppled weakling kings and thieves like the two prophets. Elijah and Elisha were prophets of power. Prophets who refused tyranny and thuggery. The 5000 had way more fire than Elijah could have hope for.

Happy second Sunday of Black History Month.

Happy Transfiguration Sunday.

Happy Final Epiphany Sunday.

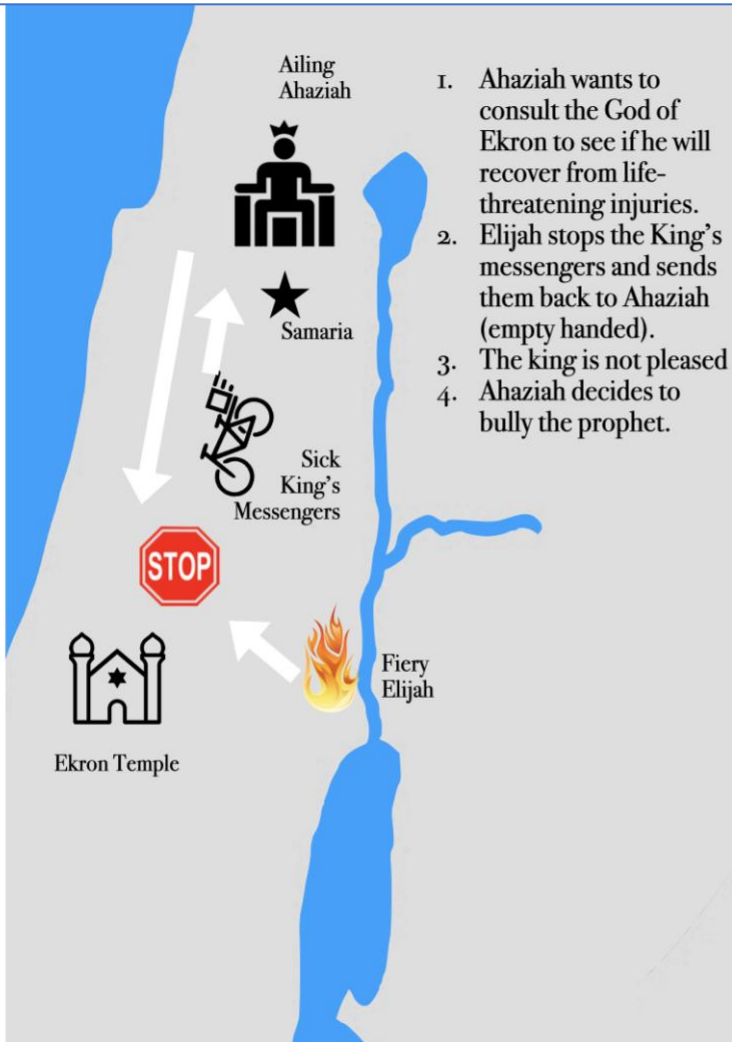
Happy Valentine's Day

Happy Sunday afternoon baby dedication (this afternoon)

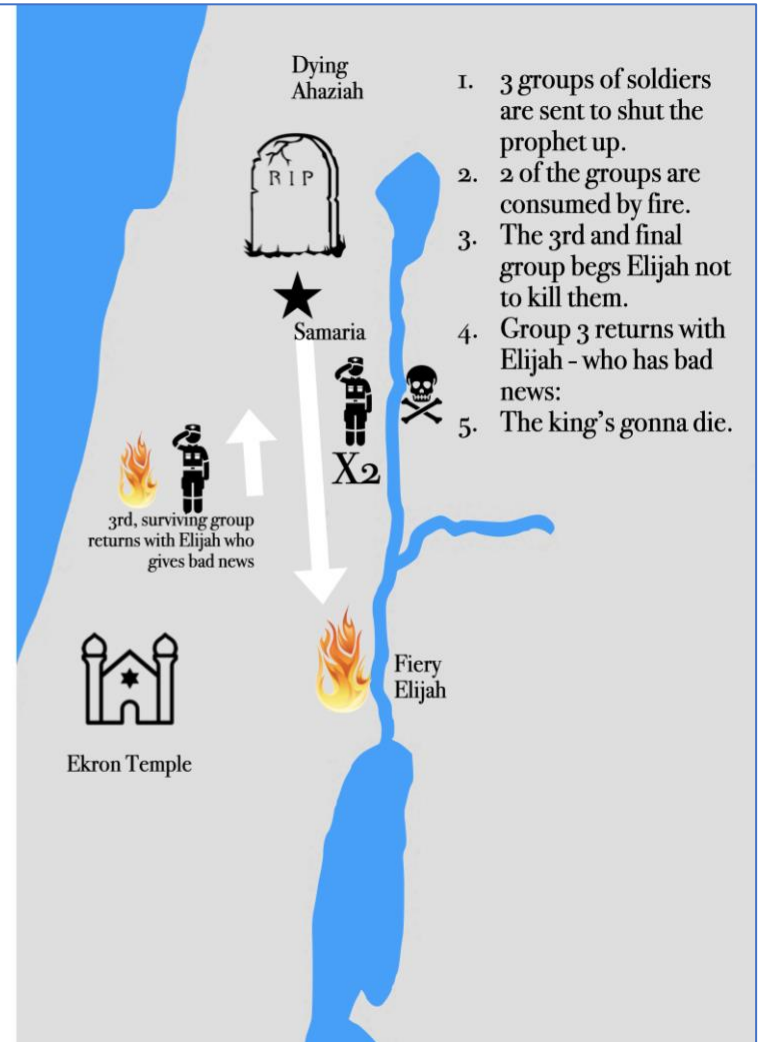
Todd

2 Kings I

Verses 1-8

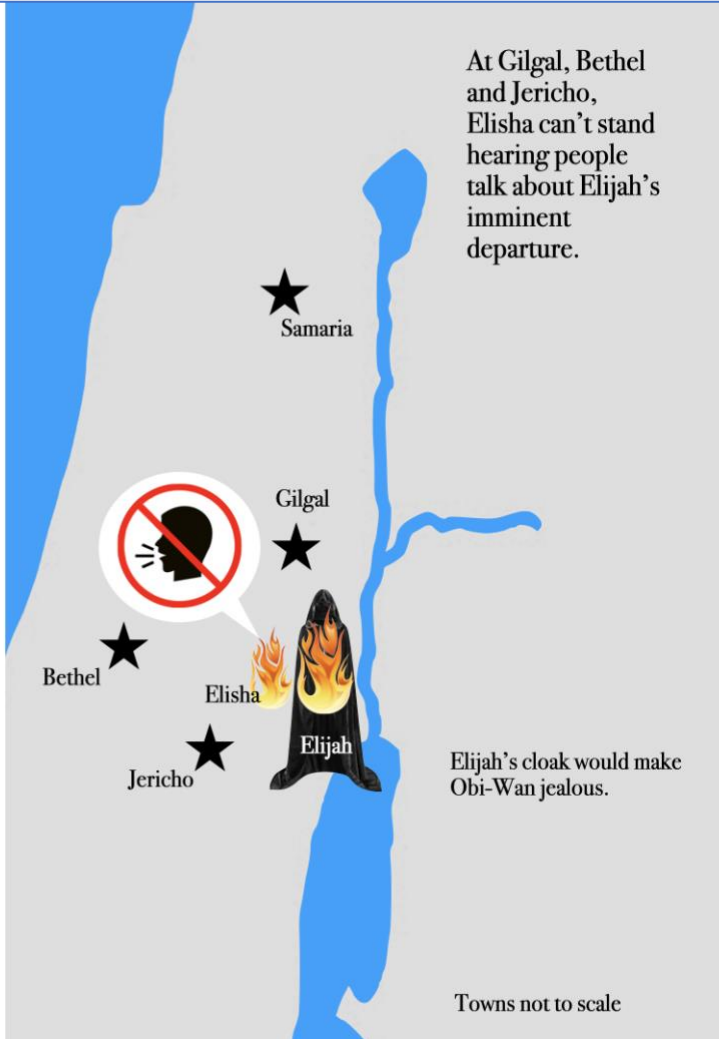


Verses 9-18



2 Kings 2

Verses 1-6



Verses 7-14

