

A Place of Grace

Bible reference for sermon text: 2 Kings 4:8-10

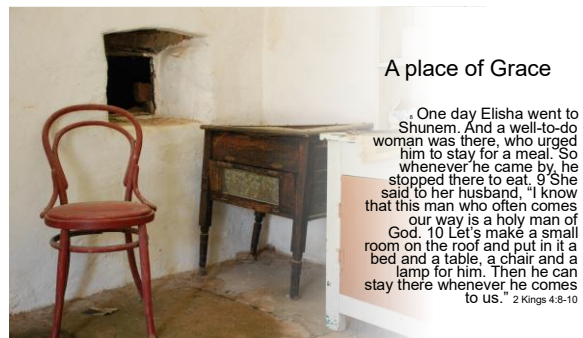
⁸ One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. ⁹ She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. ¹⁰ Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us."

Those of you who are familiar with Old Testament stories will know two stories about God's prophet Elisha, written in 2nd Kings, chapter 4.

The most well-known of those is where God, through Elisha, gave a destitute widow a miraculous supply of olive oil to bake bread for herself, her son, and the prophet.

A little less-well-known is the story about the elderly, childless couple from Shunem, who supported Elisha in his ministry. Through Elisha, God promised them the gift of a son and, when the boy died unexpectedly a few years later, Elisha called on God who restored his life.

Between those two stories are the verses we just heard, where the Shunammite couple showed kindness to Elisha in very practical ways. They invited him to stop and eat with them whenever he passed that way, and they made 'a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him' (v.10) where he could stay whenever he came to their house.



The construction of the 'small room' on the flat roof of the house would have involved a considerable amount of effort, with the wall most likely needing to be extended, at least on one side to create a kind of lean-to.

The room with its basic furnishings became much more than a lodging place for Elisha. It was the Shunammite couple's thank-offering to God because they knew Elisha was 'a holy man of God' (v.9). Their selfless hospitality was a token of their honour, their gratitude, and their service in the cause of God's word, which Elisha's presence represented to them.

For Elisha, the couple's hospitality and the furnished room became a place of fellowship, rest, study, and prayer.

Now we turn to our own story which, like the story of the miraculous supply of olive oil, is also a story of God's abundant supply of the good things he gives as our Creator. Like the story of the Shunammite couple, ours is also a story about the gift of a son - God's own Son - into a world burdened by sin and its consequences.

It is a story of that Son of God, dying an untimely death, and being raised to life by the power of God.

It is a story of the presence of God in the rough-and-tumble of our daily lives through his holy Word and the people who represent that Word.

It is a story of the abundant supply of God's forgiving grace that he offers so freely to all people.

That grace led St Paul – in our second reading today - to express praise and thanksgiving for the mercy of God shown to him, the 'worst of sinners' (1 Tim 1:12-17).

That grace is described in our Gospel reading, where Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (or the 'found sheep' and the 'found coin') remind us of his mission to seek and save those who are lost.

This story leads us to express our appreciation for the Lord's kindness and mercy. We do that through our expressions of praise and thanksgiving, as did St Paul in the second reading today, saying, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim 1:17).

Or as the shepherd in our Gospel reading did when he called his friends and neighbours and said, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep" (Luke 15:6).

Or as the woman did when she called her friends and neighbours and said, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin," or as the angels in heaven "rejoice in the presence of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:9-10).

We also express our appreciation for the Lord's kindness, like the Shunammite couple did, in very practical ways like the building of the 'ministry centre' we dedicate today. Admittedly, ours is a bit more elaborate than a lean-to on the edge of a flat roof but it carries the same significance,

First, these buildings and their furnishings are our practical acknowledgement of the presence of the Lord God in our midst, the God who comes and moves among us with his word of grace – just as he did through the prophet Elisha.

We could rightly call this building 'a place of grace'.

Second, these buildings and their furnishings are our gifts, offered ‘with joy and thanks’ in service of our Lord. They are ‘signs of his goodness and symbols of our love,’ offered to the one ‘who offered himself for us’ (see ‘Worship Today’ offering prayer).

They are our rooms, equipped with tables, chairs, lamps, and couches, in honour of the Lord’s presence and work amongst us.

They are the eyes, legs, staff, and shoulders of the Good Shepherd, which he employs in his ministry to seek and save his ‘lost sheep’.

They are the broom and the lamp of the woman searching for her lost coin. They are her place of celebration when the lost is found.

Third, these buildings and their furnishings are our reminder of the very purpose of the ministry of the Lord among us.

Like Elisha’s furniture, the chairs and couches in our ‘ministry centre’ signify God’s call to rest in the Lord’s presence and be replenished physically and spiritually for ministry. The desks and tables are places for the study of God’s Word and the work we do in his name. The rooms provide a quiet place – a place ‘set apart’ or ‘holy’ to the Lord - for us to enquire of the Lord in prayer, or to engage in godly conversation, or enjoy the fellowship of our partners in ministry. The rooms in this ‘ministry centre’ represent the ongoing ministry of the gracious God who wants others to know that he gave them his only Son, that he allowed him to die and raised him to life to call fallen sinners to himself.

They represent the God,

who still shows mercy to the ‘worst of sinners,’

who still desires all people to be saved,

who still searches for those who are lost,

who sends us out and uses us to bring his light and love to the world.

It is true that buildings are not everything! God can still do his work without them. Yet buildings, dedicated or set apart in service of the God of grace, are never just rooms with desks, chairs and lamps. They are ‘places of grace’. They are his gifts, offered to us in the service of the good news of his forgiving, seeking and saving grace. They are our gifts, offered back to him gratitude for the promise of an everlasting “city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10) and for the promise that “we who have believed [will] enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:3) which God has prepared for us eternally.

To Him alone be the glory! Amen!*Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page*
<https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>