

GOD'S WORD

I Kings 19:15-21

Intro

Our opening passage picks up with where we finished last week. Elijah is hiding from Jezebel, fearing for his life. But he has emerged from his hiding place after being in the presence of God through the sound of sheer silence, and he has now begun to listen. Elijah is given three different tasks. Elijah steps forward to fulfill the third thing first by appointing Elisha as the prophet who will follow in his steps.

What we hear in Elisha's reaction is someone who completely recognizes what he is being called to do as Elijah's successor. In recognizing that call, he asks to say good-bye to his parents. Listen to Elijah's reaction, for it is through his words that a challenge is added to the call. How does Elisha respond? How would you? The scripture reads this way. **Read I Kings 19:15-21**

¹⁵Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

¹⁹ So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was ploughing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. ²⁰He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, 'Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.' Then Elijah said to him, 'Go back again; for what have I done to you?' ²¹He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

Luke 9:51-62

Intro

Our second passage directly references what we have just heard in the story of Elijah and Elisha.

Trust me, the message that is being conveyed doesn't get any easier to swallow.

In fact, Jesus' responses to the trio of individuals who approach him show just how all-encompassing our devotion to God must be.

It's not easy.

In fact, it's incredibly hard.

Here's the question that I have: why do we so often hear those high, high expectations as a negative? The scripture reads this way.

51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. 54 When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' 55 But he turned and rebuked them. 56 Then they went on to another village.

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' 58 And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' 59 To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' 60 But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' 61 Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' 62 Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

"God's Word"

When I first looked at the lectionary passages for this Sunday this past Tuesday morning, I all but slammed my computer shut.

I have no problem admitting that I had a problem with the passages for today. My guess is that at least a few of you in attendance here this morning had a similar reaction.

"'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead.'"

I read that line three days after I officiated at a graveside service for the family of Doris Davidson. Doris was a mother, mother-in-law, great-grandmother, grandmother, sister, aunt, friend, and wife to husband Robert for 68 years. Let that sink in for a moment.

'Let the dead bury their own dead'.

It was not the comforting passage that I was hoping to hear, and I was certainly not in a place emotionally where I wanted to touch that passage with a 42 foot pole.

Traverse the Times Square on a wire?

Sure, let's try that.

Deal with the cut and dried sentiments that are being articulated in these verses? No, thank you.

That's where I started.

Now let me build you a strange bridge.

The Thursday morning Men's Group has been reading from the prophet Daniel and while so many of the visions that are articulated speak in coded language about a particular time and place, there are still truths that are able to be discerned and implemented in our lives right now. The simple reality is just because you don't understand all the ins and outs of what it says, doesn't mean that it isn't said or that we shouldn't take it seriously. It's God's Word, ...not ours.'

That was the sentiment that I walked away with just prior to opening my computer back up to look at passages that I didn't feel like I wanted to preach from.

And now here we are.

Remember (and this is for me, as much as anyone): it's God's Word.

Therefore, we look at these passages, not trying to dissect them so as to explain them away, but to humble ourselves in such a way that we are able to begin, just begin, to appreciate the message of life that we are being taught. And it is a message of life that is there: please do not doubt it. It is life.

That is why Elijah and Jesus do not mince any words in their particular passages. What they are offering is life.

The first passage shows us that Elisha understood and believed this to be true. He is out farming the field when, someone we can certainly assume to be a stranger, appears. This stranger watches Elisha as his team of oxen goes by him.

Then, when Elisha is next to him, this stranger places his garment, his mantle, around Elisha and then begins to walk away. There must have been a few moments that then passed (I can only assume that stopping twelve head of oxen does not happen on a dime!), for we are then told that Elisha runs after Elijah.

This 'strange to us' action of placing a piece of cloth over another immediately identifies Elijah to the farmer Elisha. Elisha knows what has taken place, what he has been called to: to be a prophet of the Living God. Knowing what he has been called to, he articulates a 'makes sense to us' request: let me go say good-bye to my parents.

It's logical...to us.

But the lesson that God's Word is teaching us is that following the Almighty must take precedence. We know that because Elijah makes what is known in today's vernacular, as a snarky comment: 'Go back again (to your parents); for what have I done to you?'

Then meaning? 'Sure, do whatever you want. It's only the Creator of all that you know who has chosen you. Take your time.'

Elisha picks up what Elijah is laying down, and not only does he follow him, but he sacrifices the avenue through which he made a living in his, now previous, life: he kills the oxen and serves the food that is created to all those who are around.

That really doesn't make sense to us.

But remember, this is God's Word, not ours. Are we going to immerse ourselves into the lessons that are being taught?

It seems more than a little obvious that what God desires from people of faith is a commitment to him, and the reality is that commitment to God can be downright hard.

Because, so often, what we are looking for is for God to fit into our lives, in a particular way, to fill a specific want or need that we have.

Jesus meets a few of those individuals in the passage from Luke. The first comment that Jesus makes to the first person who says that he will follow (the one about not having a place to lay his head) speaks directly to what Jesus is about to endure in Jerusalem. Here Jesus is referring to his own life.

But the next two responses: 'let the dead bury their own dead' and 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God', those are absolutely directed at us: and they are hard. In so many ways, they make no sense to us, but this is God's Word.

Also, please don't take them out of the greater context of the message of life that God proclaims through the scriptures: love (your neighbor as God first loved you and love God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength). That is the context of all that we hear.

When we hear Jesus say, let the dead bury their own dead, and those who look back are not fit, this is also the same person who wept as he saw his friends Mary and Martha mourning the death of their brother Lazarus; who looked down from the cross and said to the disciple that he loved, 'Son, behold your mother. Mother, behold your son.'; who looked at Peter and said 'get behind me Satan' almost immediately after he says to him that it will be upon Peter that Jesus will build his church.

There are a whole lot of moments where what we hear scripture say doesn't make sense to our sensibilities, to the point that that it may feel like it is in direct conflict with who we are, what we hold to be true, or what we feel we need.

In those moments that do take place when you begin to get into the Word of God, will you turn a blind eye and ear to what you have received, instead turning toward messages that more fully complement the thoughts that we have?

Or will you recognize that God's thoughts are not like our thoughts; that God's ways are not like our ways? Will we trust God...even when it doesn't make any sense to us?

Because these examples that cause us to question whether we really like the message that is being proclaimed, these examples are asking us to do that very thing. God is calling for us to trust him, to dive all the way in, not just splashing the water over us so that we get comfortable, but dive all the way in.

We have been promised that we will be cared for, that we are so precious that the Creator of all would send His son to die for our sake, even though there was nothing that we could do on our own to deserve such a gift.

That is the sort of love that is being offered. Will we trust in it?

Even when our lives become difficult and dark: with issues with our families, work, community and world so burdensome that we want to just give up, are we willing to trust in God then?

How about when everything is great and it feels like you don't have a care in the world; when you hear God's Word and it seems to speak to the exact points of need that you have? Will you trust in God then?

How about when the Word that is articulated causes us to recoil and feel like that what God is proclaiming is unfair and unjust? Will you trust then?

Whose word is this? Ours? Or God's?

It's God's Word and he longs for us to trust in Him to the point that we are able to hear 'let the dead bury their own dead' and 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' in such a way that even though we may not get it, because it feels so wrong, that we are still willing to trust in it...in Him.

It's God's Word.

After Sermon Prayer

O Almighty and Triune God, it is Your Word, so whether or not we are able to understand, resonate, or even agree with all that we are being taught, help us to always, always, always remember that this is Your Word and we are to trust in it for it breathes forth into our lost and broken world Your message of life forevermore. Lord, let it be so. Amen.

Congregational Prayer

O God, in whom we live and move and have our being, bring us near to Your throne of grace. As we read the Holy Scripture, may we be inspired with the same spirit that inspired those to whom You revealed Your sacred message. As we sing the hymns of the faith, may these tunes and lyrics resound not only in our ears today but also in our minds and hearts through this week. May Your word be spoken in sermon and broken in sacrament, so that we may discern and appropriate Your ancient word for our day.

It is with this prayer in our hearts and minds that we approach You with the joys and concerns of this congregation as we pray for **(Give List)** We also pause so that we might be able to offer up all of the joys and concerns that we have brought with us to this place. Lord, help us to trust in You with all things.

(Long Pause)

Lord, we thank You for this time of prayer and for all of the ways You implore us to trust in You. It is in Jesus' name that we do pray. Amen.