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The Problem with Good Things (1 Kings 16:29-19:21)

Common usage has made the word “preaching” mean something like a scolding, where the preacher, me, tells you what to do and how to do it from a position of superiority. That’s not what preaching is supposed to be. Preaching is a painstaking, prayerful work of expressing what God has laid on my heart to share with you, “a proclamation of Scripture in the conviction that through the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ is present to the gathered people, offering grace and calling for obedience.” (Book of Order, W 2.2007) As one theologian once expressed, preaching is not so much teaching you something new, as helping you remember what you already know, the words God has written on your heart. And so, a certain amount of preaching has to come from experience and shared humanity.

This sermon is about the problem of good things: distraction – being drawn away from our center, God, by good things (and bad things), things that grab our attention, whether it seems justified or frivolous, and that speaks to me. If none of you ever lets focus on God

and Christ slip from the center of your existence, well, then I'm preaching just to myself, and you can listen in if you want!

Heaven knows, there's plenty to distract us in our frenetic world. But it's always been this way, because keeping God at the center has also means stretching beyond our broken humanity, something we can't do without help.

How can you tell if you're distracted? Well, I drove past my stop – twice – a couple of weeks ago, thinking about what I needed to do AFTER I did what I was about to do; how about you?

Another sign for me is email. Sometimes I've found myself skimming them, especially if I think I already know what they're going to say, and there are many things clamoring for my full attention. One email I got a while back *did* get me to slow down: it began, "When are you going to read my emails all the way through?" Oops.

Sometimes you can be so focused on the task at hand that you get confused – and here's the worst part – confused and don't know it. The first President Bush was delivering a speech to some group once, when he suddenly realized what the date was. "My goodness! Today is September 7! This is the Day that shall live in Infamy, the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor!"

Well, of course he knew better; but he was so wrapped up in delivering a speech he probably didn't write to people he probably didn't

know that he didn't catch his own mix-up of *September 7* and *December 7* until too late. A real problem when the cameras are running.

Now, the Scripture that we're considering is a very long story (nearly seven chapters), and is, appropriately, full of distractions, little sparkly gems that I'd love to pick up and show you. But they're not our focus this morning, so I'm going to summarize this story with our bulletin passages as briefly as I can:

After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split in two. This story takes place in Samaria, where a new line of kings is reigning. "In the thirty-eighth year of Judah's King Asa, Ahab, Omri's son, became king of Israel. He ruled over Israel in Samaria for twenty-two years and did evil in the LORD's eyes, more than anyone who preceded him. Ahab found it easy to walk in the sins of Jeroboam, Nebat's son [the first king of the divided nation]. [Ahab] married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, who was the king of the Sidonians. He served and worshipped Baal." The key is, Ahab "found it easy to walk in the sins" of his predecessors. He really enjoyed the perks of being King.

"Elijah from Tishbe, who was one of the settlers in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As surely as the LORD lives, Israel's God, the one I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain these years unless I say so.'" Elijah is the prophet God sends to turn around Ahab, who is happily leading his entire nation astray. Elijah drops this bomb on Ahab, and then

skedaddles. And he takes the rain with him. Ahab has people searching everywhere for him, but he's safely far away, until "After many days, the LORD's word came to Elijah (it was the third year of the drought): Go! Appear before Ahab. I will then send rain on the earth. So Elijah went to appear before Ahab."

Then, the story accelerates. Elijah sets up a contest between God and Ba'al, which, of course God wins in front of the whole nation; the prophets of Ba'al are slaughtered by the Israelites: and in triumph, "Elijah then said to Ahab, 'Get up! Celebrate with food and drink because I hear the sound of a rainstorm coming.' So Ahab got up to celebrate with food and drink."

But even the spectacular end of the drought is not enough to fully engage Ahab. Elijah flees for his life, has his "still, small voice" experience with God; and, finally, it ends badly for Ahab.

There are two main human characters, Elijah and Ahab. Elijah is God's representative, but he has another role: wherever Elijah is, water is, too, and that water is a sign of the Spirit of God. You could say that Elijah is the sign of a sign: when he leaves, he takes the rain; when he returns, the drought ends.

We find ourselves in Ahab. Ahab is king, and is thoroughly distracted (seduced?) by all the good things being king brings. Devotion to any god is just part of his schedule. The cult of Ba'al was pretty

exciting stuff, lots of blood and sacrifices and parties and sex, and as king, he enjoyed the best of it.

Really, that's not hard to understand. In fact, that's the point here. That's the problem with good things. They can consume you. Life itself, trying to get through the day, can consume you; but good things, things that make life easy and comfortable, are especially effective. It's easy to lose track of what is fundamentally important, our reason for being: God.

Ahab is so wrapped up, he totally misses that Elijah speaks for God, the God of his ancestors. In fact, Ahab sees Elijah as the *problem*, when in fact he brings the solution. Ahab is dying of thirst, his land literally in drought, his spirit drying up in his "good" life, and he doesn't realize that God is offering the water of life through Elijah, the troublemaker.

We, in our own distraction, are in danger of dying of thirst, too. We probably all know someone who, in this desert, got so busy doing one thing or another that they forgot to drink enough water and became dehydrated; well, we're also surrounded by alluring, beguiling distractions, and we not only lose track of time, we lose track of our primary connection to God, to the waters of the Spirit, to the life Christ gives us through the Spirit, and we dry out, too.

Elijah shows Ahab where to find water; it comes from Israel's God. He even breaks the drought in his (and the whole nation's) presence.

But Ahab still will not change.

What Ahab doesn't recognize is that his problem is not Elijah, it's his relationship with God. Ahab is way too busy dealing with crises he can put his hands on or do something about or at least quantify to pay attention to the root cause and what to do about that. Elijah is the messenger, the prophet, one who carries the spirit, the one with the water, the one directing Ahab to what's really wrong.

Christ offered the Samaritan woman who came to the well doing her daily business "living water." Christ offers it still, to us, wherever we are. And how do we get it? When we stop playing with distractions, and place Christ at the center of our lives and see the world with Christ always in our field of view. When we learn to see and heed the "problems" that are the Elijah's in our lives, calling us back to God. When we hear Elijah, hear God calling to us in the pain, hunger, and thirst of those with whom we share God's beautiful world. When we stop to look at what we do and what happens to and around us as God calling us to him. What's disturbing to us should be pulling us to Christ, not away from him. Then we can begin to see Christ at the center of our life.

There's a series of comic strips (remember those?) called "Coffee with Jesus." They are pithy observations of our interaction with faith. This one appeared last week: a well-dressed woman says to Jesus, "I like to think I'm content, Jesus." Jesus replies, "That's awesome, Lisa. Because as I'm sure you know (as Paul wrote to Timothy) godliness with contentment is great gain."

Lisa replies, "Sure... Paul... Timothy... And as soon as my kitchen is remodeled, I'll be more content than I've ever been, Jesus."

Jesus answers, "Except that in five years, Lisa, your kitchen will be a hideous reminder to you of what was fashionable in 2015."

Good *things* don't last. The contentment that lies in remembering that we are God's, and all we do should reflect that remembering, that lasts forever.

No matter how good (or bad) things may seem, as Augustine said, "our hearts are restless until they rest in [God]."