

Sermon - 06-26-22
Ps 77; 2 Ki 2:1-2, 6-14;
Gal 5:1, 13-25; Lu 9:51-62
The City of God – Freedom Is Ours

“The Bible School teacher was carefully explaining the story of Elijah the Prophet and the false prophets of Baal. She explained how Elijah built the altar, put wood on it, cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the altar. And then Elijah commanded the people of God to fill four barrels of water and pour it over the altar. He had them repeat this two more times. ‘Now,’ said the teacher, ‘can anyone in the class tell me why the Lord would have Elijah pour water over the ox on the altar?’” A little girl in the back of the room raised her hand with great enthusiasm. “To make the gravy.” (juliantrubin.com/bible study)

Nobody got to eat that barbecue. The entire thing: sacrifice, wood, stones and all the water were consumed by fire from heaven. This was a sign and a demonstration of God’s sovereign power. All the people who were there said. “The Lord, He is God. The Lord, He is God.” Surely some turned in faith to the Creator God that day. It was a great day for God and His prophet.

We have learned between 1 Kings 19 and this passage from 2 Kings that there are to be major shifts in the government and politics of the whole region. God is about to remove the lawful succession from the royal family by putting the violent Jehu on the throne of Israel and the treacherous Hazael on the throne of Aram (Syria). Also, God commands Elijah to anoint Elisha as the lead prophet of the people because God is about to take Elijah into His holy presence without passing through death.

God is about to sweep the threshing floor – to remove the rotten, idolatrous royalty from the body of His people. Hazael will make war on Israel from the outside. King Jehu will hunt down and kill every possible successor to Ahab. He will wipe out the entire family. It’s not a pretty sight. We may well ponder the mystery of God’s working among fallen humanity. You and I may ask, “Why Lord?” I can only remind us all that God is no respecter of persons. Human depravity seems to be inexhaustible. We usually soften the description of entrenched wickedness by calling it fallenness. But institutional, official national evil is depravity as much as personal wickedness is. Who can free us from this prison of sin?

It seems to me, although we cannot entirely grasp how it was to live in the 9th c BC (Elijah’s time)– or even the 1st c AD (Jesus’ time) – we can see and meditate upon the mighty wonders God has accomplished through human beings in the world. The culture and society of ancient times were vastly different from ours. The roots of culture in the ANE were tribal and nomadic. Rulers were strongmen. We are a constitutional democracy.

Even so, the zone created by faith and trust in God – both now and then is where God’s Spirit moves. God has not changed in all the millennia. Jesus called it the coming of – or the nearness of the kingdom of God.

Elijah told the Lord, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword...” (1 Ki 19:14) God is about to bring about divine justice. We moderns do not recognize the bloody work of Hazael and Jehu as God’s righteousness. God uses unrighteous persons to accomplish His divine will. Old-time preachers said. “God gives straight licks with crooked sticks.” Before God unleashed the forces of retribution, He literally lifted His Prophet Elijah up to Himself by a wondrous rescue – in a fiery chariot. Elijah was translated into eternity in the flesh. No death occurred.

Jesus, the unique – and only Son of God died a human death – a terrible, painful execution on a Roman cross. God’s will works through the sacrifice of the one perfect, sinless human being to fulfill God’s covenant promise to cleanse all His beloved fallen humanity. Only God is good. Only God is sovereign. Only God in Christ can free human souls from the continuous temptation to “bite and devour one another,” as the Apostle Paul teaches the Galatians.

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Once we give up our own sovereignty – and relinquish the so-called freedom to call the shots for ourselves, then we are following our Savior Jesus Christ – not on some random journey to a shiny heavenly home. No, we will go with Jesus past many good and worthwhile things – on the path of transformation into His likeness – onward to the better and the best things. I hear you asking, “How holy must I be?” I cannot answer that for you. In our Gospel passage for today, each would-be disciple wants to follow Him. But each of them puts earthly responsibilities ahead of serving the Lord. Family obligations are important – caring for parents – keeping our close human relationships as we move on to follow our Lord. Recall that Elijah allowed Elisha to return home to say good-bye to his family.

Jesus makes a more compelling and urgent call upon those who say, “I will follow You, Lord.” As He sets His face to go to Jerusalem, He is utterly sold out to God’s calling on His life. He will not stop until He walks through death, rises to New Life and then goes to His heavenly home. Jesus calls you and me to freedom from sin – freedom from earthly limitations – freedom from special times and special places in this world. This is a higher calling.

The joys and sorrows of this life fade in the light of the city of God – our eternal home in God’s presence. When this life is drawing to a close what will your legacy be? Will your virtues look good on a resumé – or will they be what you want said at your funeral? When in doubt, choose the words of your eulogy. (David Brooks quoted in *Our Daily Bread*, vol 64, no 3, 6/3/19)

Our deliverance and salvation in Jesus free us to live for what really matters. True freedom here and now – bearing fruit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Goodness, Kindness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control. Amen.