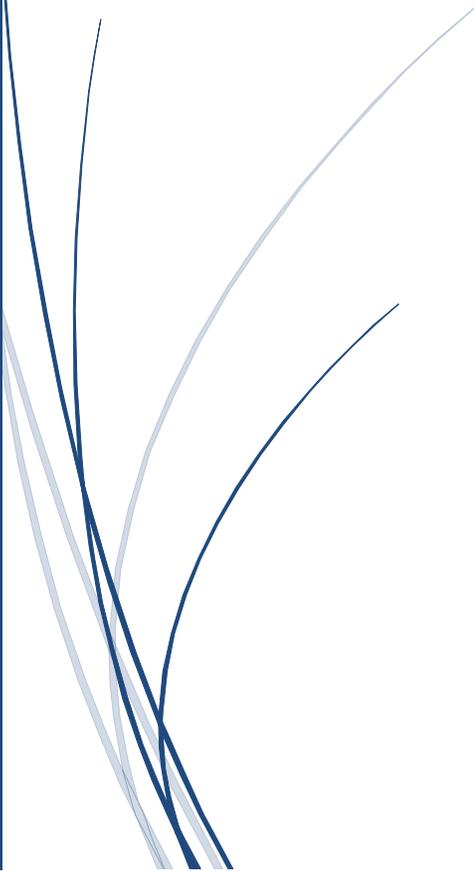


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BEYOND THE DISTRACTIONS

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:13-25; Luke 9: 51-62

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Brad Walston, from a sermon by the Rev. Nils Chittenden
BCUMC/TCUMC/CCUMC

Elijah and Elisha. It's an epic story – pure Hollywood. Throw together a few parts “Lord of the Rings,” and few parts, “Indiana Jones,” and few parts “Harry Potter,” and we could have the blockbuster of the season!

There are wicked kings and queens (remember Jezebel from last week), wild-bearded ascetic revolutionaries – that's Elijah; wide-eyed disciples eager to drink from the deep well of the master's wisdom (that's Elisha, the protégé), sacred magical garments (Elijah's ‘mantle’), not to mention the incredible scenery – mountains, deserts, rushing rivers...

And that's before we even begun to consider the special effects, the likes of which would make George Lucas proud: Whirlwinds, the magical parting of rivers, earth-shattering pyrotechnics exploding down from the heavens, horses and chariots of fire, action, adventure, spectacle...

Fornication, licentiousness, impurity, idolatry...

Wait, what? Those aren't from Elijah's story; those are from Paul's letter to the Galatians.

And what a letter it is! Here's that list again: “...fornication, impurity, licentiousness,²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,²¹ envy,^[c] drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

Whatever it was that those Galatians were up to, you can bet it wasn't stamp collecting! And the themes Paul raises – the dangers of replacing one kind of slavery with the bonds of another – slavery to self-gratification and self-indulgence.

So let's look at this in detail.

We have a wonderfully vivid description of Elijah – whirlwinds, fire from heaven; It reminds me of the disciples coming back from that Samaritan village. They must have been thinking about Elijah, as well. They ask Jesus if he wants them to summon down fire on the Samaritans because the locals wouldn't receive him. It's remarkable. What on earth were the disciples thinking, wishing fiery destruction on a simple village?

“Foxes have their holes but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

“Let the dead bury their own dead.”

“No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Wait – stop. Weren’t we talking about the Galatians? No – it was the Samaritan village! Or was it Elijah? Stop distracting me!

But that’s the whole point. There are so many wonderful, exciting, vibrant, insightful, diverting, and important things that could be said about all of today’s readings. We could so easily flit from one to the next, lighting on some little scene that strikes our fancy, and then another, and another, why, we’d end up with one glorious, Technicolored mess.

In this day and age, distractions abound like wildflowers in the alpine meadows. And we don’t avoid them – we seek them out! Have you ever wondered why the term ‘multi-tasking’ doesn’t seem to have any negative connotations? In fact, we seem to view the ability to do more than one thing at a time as a virtue!

Texting during a meeting? -- Sure, why not? Checking Facebook at a dinner party? Go for it! Everyone does it... That way people around us can see how busy we are – how full and active, and important our lives are. Maybe it persuades me how important I am, as well. We flit from one shiny thing to the next, impressed – wowed – by sleeker, faster, bigger, smaller, I don’t think it matters.

There are so many distractions and diversions. And they’re all conspiring to take our minds off the ball – off the important stuff. Faced with this mid-boggling array of choices, we quickly lose our focus.

All the characters we met in today’s readings – apart from Jesus, of course – are distracted. Jesus’ disciples are distracted by their hatred of the Samaritans. The people Jesus and the disciples meet along the way are distracted by their material possessions, duties and social conventions. The Galatians are distracted by all manner of short-lived, selfish gratification or petty jealousies. And Elisha is distracted by his mentor Elijah’s departure and the thought that he might not inherit Elijah’s special powers.

Even Elijah was distracted. Remember last week, we talked about how Elijah had challenged the pagan priests of Baal to a competition to see whose God was more powerful. And in a story with just as many special effects, and action, and violence

as today's story, the pagan priests lost, and in triumph, Elijah orders the massacre of all 450 of them.

After all this spilt blood, Elijah falls into a depression and goes and hides in a cave. Of course, part of the reason he was hiding could have been that there was a price on his head, but there's more to it than that.

"Enough!" says Elijah. "Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." One good lesson here is never to compare ourselves to other people. My grandmother used to say, "Comparisons are odious." You are not your ancestors, your friends, or that guy across the street with the nice yard, and they are not you.

But this moment for Elijah is nothing less than his conversion (after all these years?). You see, Elijah set his God Yahweh in competition with the pagan Baal. But all he accomplished by that was that he managed to lower himself to the same level as the Baal guys that he claimed to be superior to.

The great altar contest on the mountain had only ended up being a show of strength between rival priests. Elijah had spent his life seeking God in the earthquakes, winds, and fire – in the distractions -- but eventually, when he finally shut up and listened, Elijah found God in the still small voice.

Roman Catholic theologian and priest James Alison, in his book entitled, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, calls Elijah's dark night of the soul his 'undeceiving.' He came to the realization that what set God apart from all the other gods – like Baal – was not that his God was more muscular, more powerful, but that God was, in fact, the exact opposite of all that.

But Elijah's conversion experience doesn't seem to have withstood the test of time, filtering down to Jesus' disciples. No, the disciples and their contemporaries seem to prefer the noisy showmanship of pre-conversion Elijah. Their suggestion to rain down fire and brimstone on the Samaritan village is just as off-target as Elijah's had been.

Time and again we read how the disciples never quite seemed to get it. We know they do eventually, but it's a long journey for them to realize that God's strength is in our weakness, God's rule is in our servanthood, God's power is in our humility, and God's judgment is our forgiveness.

Are we so much smarter and more insightful than those original twelve disciples? Before we jump to any conclusions, let's take a second and consider whether we – and the church in general – get it any more than they did. More and more people are saying that the church is at a pivotal point in its life. Some even describe it as a collapse.

In his book, Alison suggests that Elijah's conversion experience tells us that our own religious identities might need turning upside-down, too. "Here we are," writes Alison, "face to face with the collapse of the sacred, a real demolition of personal structures and ways of speaking about God. This collapse is the crucible in which theological development is wrought."

It certainly is a time for some real, wholesale, re-assessment. And maybe that's not a bad thing. Maybe, as Christian commentators like Diana Butler Bass and Phyllis Tickle suggest, we're on the brink of a new Great Awakening. Maybe that's where we will finally hear the still small voice of God, and what God's voice is inviting us to do. Maybe it's where we will understand better how to break free of the slavery of distractions.

Amen.