

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8)

1 Kings 19:9b – 21; Luke 9:51 – 62

How to plow.

The text for today’s sermon is the Old Testament reading appointed for this Sunday, the Third Sunday after Pentecost. Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God, our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

**On what has now been sown Thy blessing, Lord, bestow; The pow'r is Thine alone To make it spring and grow. Do Thou in grace the harvest raise, And Thou alone shalt have the praise.**

To a city boy, this Gospel text is unfamiliar in its reference. We had a small yard, we had a push lawnmower. We had shovels and rakes for the garden. We didn’t know anything about plows and procedures for farms. As long as the front wheel of the lawnmower was overlapping some cut grass, we were doing good.

It wasn’t until we went to work on our uncle’s farm that this quote from Jesus made sense. **“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”** When we were told to plow a field, or to use another tractor attachment, we had to learn to change our focus from the here and now (the front tire) to the future (a spot at the end of the field or beyond). It is only when you set your focus far ahead that you are able to plow a straight line. If you keep looking back to see what it looks like behind you, two things will happen. The rows will meander and Uncle John will be upset.

Set your mind upon the things of God.

What has gone on with Elijah to this point? Elijah, in the verses leading up to our Old Testament lesson, just had the head–to–head competition with the prophets of Baal. Elijah is on the one side. The 450 prophets of Baal, along with 400 prophets of Asherah, were on the other side. This is a battle royale to see whose god is the true god. Two bulls were provided for the sacrifice. Elijah allowed the other team (the visiting team) to select their bull.

The rules were simple. Build your altar. Lay your wood on the altar. Prepare your sacrifice. Place your sacrifice on the wood. DO NOT put any fire to it. Pray to your god to come down and consume “his” offering with fire. Whichever god answers by fire, he is God. From morning until noon, the prophets of Baal called upon their god. Nothing happened. At noon, Elijah started mocking them saying: **“Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”**

The prophets of Baal didn’t stop with just calling to their god, they started cutting themselves so that their blood gushed out. The scripture states as midday passed Elijah began to prepare his sacrifice. Much like the other team, he prepared his altar. He stacked 12 stones, one for each tribe of Israel. He placed wood upon the altar. He killed the bull and had the flesh placed on the wood. At this point, he increased the difficulty level by a lot. He had them dig a ditch around the altar. He then said: **“Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.”** This is not difficult enough: **And he said, “Do it a second time.”** And they did it a second time. Still, this is not difficult enough: he said, **“Do it a third time.”** And they did it a third time. That is twelve jars of water. And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

The flesh of the bull, the wood, the altar, and the trench are drenched with water and the trench is full of water. Elijah waits for the right time, and then says: **“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”**

What do you think happened? **Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.** Elijah offered a small prayer, and God answered in power. **When the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.” 40And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.” And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.**

God Almighty, 1 – false god Baal, 0. Prophets of God, 1 left. Prophets of Baal 0 left. Now we arrive at our Old Testament reading. Elijah is looking over his shoulder and is afraid of what Ahab and Jezebel might do to him. He experienced the power of God, and yet he is afraid.

What is Elijah supposed to do? God tells him. **Behold, the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10He said, “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” 11And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.**

Elijah experienced a strong wind that tore mountains and broke rocks. But the Lord was not in the wind. He then experienced an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. These events, the wind and the earthquake would have all of us trembling in our socks. Yet, Elijah understood that those events were not of the Lord. **And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. 13And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.**

The Lord was present in the low whisper. Many times, in our lives, we may interpret a major event as something of the Lord’s doing. Maybe we were spared a major injury in an accident. Maybe we were a witness to an accident and we were able to offer first aid until the early responders arrived. The Lord is not a chess master. If the Lord were, he would not have allowed Adam and Eve to be approached by the serpent.

**And behold, there came a voice to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 14He said, “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”** Elijah is revealing all that he fears to the Lord God.

God gives Elijah a gameplan, a purpose for his time left on earth. **15And the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. 16And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.**

Here, we have an interesting set of instructions. Anoint Hazael king over Syria (the enemy of the northern ten tribes of Israel). Anoint Jehu king over Israel. Jehu will take the place of Ahab and Jezebel. Syria and Israel, at this point, have been in an ongoing war. Here, Elijah is ordered to anoint these opposing kings. What is interesting is that there is no mention of Elijah anointing Hazael as king of Syria. Neither Elijah, nor Elisha, anointed Jehu as king over Israel. It was a servant of Elisha that anointed Jehu.

Elijah did, however, anoint Elisha as his successor. **17And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. 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.”** Even now, God will preserve the remnant. The seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him (Baal).

**19So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. 20And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And he said to him, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” 21And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.**

How does this connect to the Gospel text? Elisha responds to his calling just as the follower of Jesus. **“Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.”** was said to Elijah. **“I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”** was said to Jesus. These statements are nearly identical. However, the response is not. Elijah responded with: **“Go back again, for what have I done to you?”** This is almost an apology for calling him. Jesus responded with: **“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”**

The language that Jesus used is found throughout the Old Testament. Lot’s wife looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah, and was turned into a pilar of salt. The Israelites constantly complained about “dying here in the desert, when we were better off back in Egypt.” The Israelites always looking for King David’s heir to be restored to the throne. All of these are a direct rejection of God’s grace.

We take the time to read what happened in the past. We do not look to the past as “the golden years.” Instead, we look forward to the time where we are restored to what was originally intended for us – sitting at the feast in heaven, in the presence of God. How did (do) we get there? It is certainly not because we live a “good” life. It is not because of the deeds that we have done. It is ONLY because of the work that Jesus did for us. Jesus paid the price for all of us. A few weeks ago, when my classmate was visiting us, we looked at the last words of Jesus.

It is finished. This phrase may be interpreted three ways.

Task – the work that you sent me to do has been completed. Jesus was sent into the world to be tempted by the devil. He never gave into temptation, even up to the point of death.

Financial – the cost that you demanded has been paid. There is no more debt owed. God said that the cost of sin is death. Jesus died to sin, so that we are not burdened by sin anymore.

Legal – the sentence imposed has been served. There is no probationary period. The legal standard has been satisfied.

**Oh, grant that each of us Now met before Thee here May meet together thus When Thou and Thine appear And follow Thee to heav'n, our home. E'en so, Amen, Lord Jesus, come!**

Now, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.