

September 3, 2023
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Matt Duerr

“Let Not One Escape!”

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. Last week we saw the end of the sermon series The Seven C’s of the Christian Faith, with a quote from the book of Hebrews; where the author tells us God has said; (He's called it today) “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart.” It was a call to action because we saw Jesus is the fulfillment of all prophecy. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus is the only hope for all eternity. And there's a personal call for action; but there's also a personal call for the Church in that. I would say the personal call to action is the first, and the second is the call for the Church to get in action. And all too often, we skip that first call, the personal call, and we go to the second one, the action of the Church. It usually sounds something like this, “somebody really ought to...” In other words, pointing the finger elsewhere instead of looking at self.

And I think that's part of the problem Jesus was talking about in the parable of the foolish builder. He was so focused on himself and his wealth and what he was going to do with it, that he lost the big picture. He first needed to take care of himself. He was building for the here and now and not the future. He was focused on the physical life and not the spiritual life and the spiritual responsibility. And we see a lot of that today where we put the spiritual responsibility, the spiritual life on the back burner. We do this all too often and I was thinking about that this past week while I was working outside.

I was listening to a podcast called ‘Politics by Faith,’ it's done by a guy by the name of Mike Slater. I listen to it every day. I was listening to it and he was talking on Friday about Elijah; just a 5 minute devotion. I thought, oh this is going to be good, I love Elijah and the biblical narrative about him. It’s a time when Israel was in spiritual trouble spiritual turmoil. See if this sounds familiar. The foundation of this trouble could easily be pointed to as politics and lousy politicians. In

particular the king Ahab, and his wife queen Jezebel, who by the way was a non-Hebrew. But it was a marriage that was politically expedient because she was the daughter of the king of Tyre which was just north of Israel and potentially one of their enemies. And so, Ahab married her. Now Saint Paul would talk about that as being unequally yoked and Saint Paul is absolutely right. What does someone from the Jewish faith who believes in Yahweh the living God, have to do with someone who believes in well gods carved out of wood and stone? It's a classic example again, of the foolish builder. Looking at what's politically expedient, and what's going to work in the here and now and not looking at the long term repercussions.

And yet there's more here because when we look at the scripture, we read that king ignored God's word. In particular one of the first things he did was he ignored what Joshua said after the fall of Jericho. Joshua said, 'cursed be the man before the Lord who rises up and builds this city Jericho. He shall lay its foundation with his first and with his youngest he shall set up its gates.' It's a curse. God overthrew Jericho and it was supposed to remain a dust pile as a monument, shall we say, to remind people of how God is the real God. He acts on their behalf and how He does not accept Pagan worship, sinful worship, etcetera.

And so, we read in first Kings chapter 16, that king Ahab ignored that. He rebuilt Jericho and it was at the cost of his first born in the laying of the foundation, and of his youngest in the setting of the gate. He lost his children! He defied what God said. God followed through on what He had said in the first place. But putting it all together, 1 Kings 16:33, I think really sums up King Ahab. He did more to provoke the Lord, that's Yahweh, the I AM, the singular God of Israel. He did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel before him.

Ahab was bad. So, God sent the prophet Elijah to him who gave him a message. You're terribly sinful, you need to turn from your ways and repent. Until you do so, there's going to be a drought and it's going to last for years. It kind of takes us back to last year. What Elijah was saying is, there's going to be radical climate change King Ahab and it's

because of man. It's because of man in particular yours and the children of Israel's SIN not their CO2. Ahab did not take that message well and Elijah fled to the wilderness where God cared for him sent Ravens in the morning and evening bringing him food to eat. And he was there by the brook Cherith for water. But as we see here in California; in drought years, the small brooks tend to dry up. This is what happened to Cherith, and God told him, 'go north, go to Sidon. There's a window there she'll take you in. And so he left Israel, he went to Sidon and there he met the widow of Zerpeth who was gathering sticks to create a fire to make her last meal with her and her son because she was out of food. The famine was there as well. And he asks her, or tells her, 'give me a morsel to eat.' And she's like, 'are you kidding? This is my last meal. I don't have anything!' 'Trust me, trust the Lord. Make something to eat and feed me.' She did and the result of that jar flour was replenished every day and the jug of oil was replenished every day. The Lord was taking care of Elijah, the widow, and her son.

But then her son died and her response to Elijah was, 'Did God bring you here to bring my sin to my memory?' She obviously had done something wrong. Maybe it was the reason she was a widow, we don't know. But you could see that this woman is racked with guilt. And in the presence of a prophet of God, and now death, she understood the wages of sin is death and she immediately assumed it was because of her and not just living in a sin marred world. Or maybe something to bring God glory. So, Elijah took the boy, prayed the boy was raised from the dead.

Wow! That's exactly what that widow of Zarephath needed. That's exactly what Elijah needed because immediately after that God tells Elijah, it's time to go back. We're in the third year of drought. You need to go back and talk to King Ahab. Imagine how Ahab was. Ahab blamed Elijah for the drought because Elijah is the one who announced it was coming. He did not look at himself and his sin and the peoples sin as a reason. No it's Elijah's fault, it's the messenger 's fault. And so, he had put out a death warrant, a bounty on Elijah's head. Not just in Israel but even in the surrounding countries. So that if Elijah went anywhere

and someone recognized him, he might be caught, captured, killed, and the person paid off.

And so was Elijah is now heading into Israel, heading towards the capital, to meet with the king who hates him, has a bounty on his head; he runs into a guy named Obadiah who happens to be the head of king Ahab's household. But he is a believer and when queen Jezebel started having all of the prophets arrested and executed, Obadiah himself took 100 of God's prophets, those who spoke God's word, and he hid them away. So he now knows, this guy knows exactly how Ahab and Jezebel are acting and Elijah comes to him and says, "hey, go tell Ahab, I want to meet him. And Obadiah's response is, 'He'll kill me. There's a bounty out on you!'" Elijah tells him, 'Go, tell him to come here to meet me.' And Obadiah does and Ahab shows up. Where? At Mount Carmel.

Now Elijah had told Obadiah to tell Ahab to meet him there but also told him to bring those 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Ashura who eat at Jezebel's table with you every day. We'll talk a little bit more about that, but it tells you where his household was. In his house, he had 850 pagan prophets and priests. And so when Ahab brings his entourage, as well as the people of Israel, with him for this big showdown; the first thing Elijah does when the people come is he says to them, "how long will you go limping between two opinions?" Limping, I think of something that's limp like a wet noodle. It just wavers. That's what he's accusing the people of. You're not taking a stand. Each one of you is individually responsible. How long will you go on limping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, if Yahweh is Elohim, then follow Him and if baal is God, then follow him. And the response... they limped. The people said not one word.

They didn't answer at all and that's when Elijah lays out the challenge. Go ahead, let's both build an altar, you pick two bulls, your choice. I don't care, you take one, give me one for the sacrifice. What kind of bull do you think, by the way, they gave Elijah? Build them but here's the rule. No fire. You can't set fire to the sacrifice. We will both pray to our God and let our God light the fire for us. Elijah said, 'you go first.' Think about what Elijah said right there, if they pray to baal, and

baal brings fire down from heaven, lights to sacrifice, he's god. That means Elijah dies without even trying. That's how confident Elijah was in the Lord. That's a tremendous level of personal confidence.

So, the prophets of Baal first build it and they begin to pray and to limp around it. The way it's written, it's kind of making fun of the way they did their ceremonial dancing. It was disjointed, it was limping and made no sense. It started at 9:00 in the morning, by noon well there's no fire from heaven. That's when Elijah gets a little sarcastic and maybe having a little bit of fun, I don't know. but he says perhaps baal is musing, that is he's amused by this, he's sitting back and going 'bravo, bravo, good show,' Or perhaps (this is my favorite) he is relieving himself. He's going to the celestial bathroom; he probably had some problems since it was three hours. But then again, a god maybe takes that long, I don't know. Maybe he's on a journey and that's why he hasn't answered you, or perhaps he's just asleep and he needs to be awakened.

Their response, 'it must be the latter, he's asleep, or musing. He doesn't see how serious we are so we're going to really get serious. So, they start crying out, yelling, they begin cutting themselves. The Bible records, 'blood rushed out upon them, and they raved.' That's a modern term it's a wild, ecstatic, loud event and they did this from noon to three. They had six hours of invoking baal's name, and baal come and do this and nothing has happened.

That's when Elijah says to the people, 'come near to me.' He rebuilds the altar. It had been knocked down. This is where Joshua had built the altar with 12 stones. He rebuilds it with those 12 stones. He then places the wood. It's orderly because our God is a God of order not dis-order and he places the bull on it. He tells the people, pour jars of water there. They probably brought water with them. This was quite a bit of water because they have all these people, and they need to drink. Take those four jars water, douse it, douse the sacrifice. They do it, do it again, do it again, do it a third time. They do it a third time and we read that there was so much water that the trench overflowed. And then what did the Elijah do? Much like the dead son of the widow, he prayed;

“Answer me O Lord, Yahweh. Answer me that this people may know that You, oh Lord are God.

Notice he doesn't say, ‘answer me so that they know I'm the prophet, answer me so that they will pay me better.’ It's all about God and the salvation of the people. He speaks of again Yahweh, I AM, in the singular. And the God, singular, one God, and fire fell from heaven and consumed everything. The people realized they were in the presence of God. And they had always been wrong. And they quote “fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, He is God.”

Elijah didn't stop there. He said, seize the prophets of baal. Here comes the title of the sermon, “Let Not One of Them Escape!” And they did. And every one of those prophets of baal, they were executed. They were each held accountable for their part their personal part in leading people astray and profiting from it. Remember 850 of these pagan priests and prophets eating at the Queen's table. A place of prestige, in a place of power, in a place of luxury and all of it at the expense of the people as a whole; because this was taxpayer funded.

By now you might be saying, ‘oh pastor Matt, I see you where you're going with this; let not one escape. Let's go get these stupid politicians! No, no, that's not at all! Where I'm going with it yes, I do believe that any that are not doing things that bring glory to God, ought to be voted out of office. But no, no, if we start doing that then we're guilty of what Jesus warns us about of picking the speck out of our brothers eye when we have a log in our own.

No, I want you to think back to Jesus's ministry. Following His baptism, His very first recorded word, speaking to the people, ‘repent.’ And I believe that we need to take Elijah 's words, ‘let not one escape,’ and apply that to our repentance. It's a call for personal introspection. And too often when we do that, we are focused on the big sins, and on others. ‘Oh look at them, they did this, they did this, they did this, they did this.’ Or certainly I'm not a murderer, I'm not an adulterer, I'm not a thief. We focus on the big ones but we dare not look in the mirror at ourselves and our favorite ones. Maybe the foul mouth. I can hardly

watch anything on TV anymore. All too often, they take the name of the Lord in vain. But it's also just foul language constantly. And the Bible tells us, or asks us that question; "How can a filthy mouth be a filthy mouth at one moment and then the next praising God?" It can't because people will see that and see hypocrisy.

The love of money, it is the root of all sorts of evil. Maybe we cheat on our taxes, or maybe we have a business we don't pay people quite as well or we withhold a little bit or maybe we work for someone we withhold some that's supposed to go to them. Maybe we cheat on our tithes. Oh 10%, 1% should be fine. Do you know the average in our country now is I think 2/10 of 1%. That is the average giving of an active, practicing Christian. What do outsiders see when we do that; behave that way? Whether it's in business or in the church. They see hypocrisy!

And then their spiritual adultery, not cheating on your spouse, but cheating on Jesus. We are His bride, the bride of Christ. As we heard last week in the book of Hebrews; "Do not forsake the public gathering as some were in the habit of doing." And yet how often do people just skip church because well there's something else that's more important to them? And that's putting them before God. Personal desire before God and that's seen as hypocrisy.

Let's be very honest and deal with reality church attendance is declining here in Zion and basically every church Christian Church in the country, and in the world, except maybe Africa. Why? There's many studies that have been done, many polls taken, many surveys, and they are very consistent. The number one reason people don't join a church or they fall away from the church is hypocrisy. Yes, definitely there's some hypocrisy in the priesthood, many a pastor is living the life of a hypocrite. But let's not just blame the pastor. Because if people are leaving the church and they don't want to come it's because they look at the people and see the people as hypocrites too. That's a number one reason.

The second reason is there's just no need. They don't see a need for the church and in a day and age where we are told to trust the government's going to take care of you. And by the way, socialize. It's a

whole lot more fun to go down to the bar and socialize and we'll have a rave, shall we say.

But it really speaks about what is happening in our country and what we as individuals need to do. We are getting further and further as a country; and the Church itself, is getting further and further away from God. As a result, His hand is withdrawn, and the blessings don't come flowing down quite as much. We're called to repent. Can we do that individually? Let not one sin escape. Change, change. Listen carefully to how you speak, how you act, what people see in you, and now let them see the light of the gospel coming through you as you live lives of righteousness for God's sake.

And let's follow that mantra that was popular back in the 1970's "Let it begin with me." Not, let it begin with him. Look in the mirror, each one, introspect, identify your sins, let not one escape and repent. Turn from them, be forgiven from them, and then shine and then together we can all shine as the body of Christ, as the Church. But first it has to begin with each one of us, individually. In our Savior's Name, Amen.