

Sermon for 5 Epiphany, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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Our Old Testament lesson takes place in the northern kingdom of Israel, the part of David's and Solomon's kingdom which is north of Jerusalem. Ever since Solomon's death, the northern and southern kingdoms have been divided, and the northern kingdom worships God through the idolatrous golden calf set up in Bethel. They have broken the second commandment not to erect any graven images. And all of the kings of Israel are counted as unfaithful for this reason.

But it gets worse before this morning's story begins. Until recently, the northern kingdom was ruled by King Ahab and his pagan queen Jezebel, and though Ahab has died, the sons of Jezebel still rule in Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom. Jezebel is the one who has tried to make the worship of Baal into the official religion of Israel. Her great opponent was the prophet Elijah, who killed the prophets of Baal with the sword on Mt. Carmel. But Elijah has also been taken by the Lord. His successor, Elisha, is now the great opponent of the house of Ahab.

Even after Elijah's great contest on Mt. Carmel, almost all of the people of Israel either worship the pagan Gods of Jezebel or are simply confused and disinterested. But it seems that there are small communities of the faithful, the sons of the prophets, scattered about the northern kingdom. And Elisha seems to visit them all, traveling about the country to oversee the various communities. It is on these frequent peregrinations that he often travels through the village of Shunem, where the unnamed lady of means feeds and houses him, recognizing in him a true man of God.

The country is in dire spiritual straights at the very highest levels, and in the last chapter Elisha was dealing with kings and warfare and human sacrifice. (No kidding; go read it.) But here he is, in the midst of all that, attending to the everyday needs of ordinary people in miraculous ways.

You see, here is a faithful woman whose husband is old. In those days, Social Security was called children. And more specifically, grown sons. It was the duty of the children to care for their parents in old age. It's actually a much more sensible system than a bankrupt Social Security fund, but it has its own drawbacks. And the most obvious of these is that those who are childless are left destitute. If the woman has no son, then there is no one to care for her in her own old age. She has no security. This is why widows are especially mentioned when God is handing down the duties of true religion. Widows and orphans are the most vulnerable members of that society.

And that is why God gives her a son through the prophet. It's also why he raises the son back to life again, as well as the fact that the son is now valuable to God in his own right. In the midst of all the political, social, and religious upheaval, God is at work through his prophet, meeting the needs of faithful people, bringing life and light into death and darkness.

But this domestic side of God's grace has a political, social, and religious point to it, as well. Baal, the God of Jezebel, is supposed to be the Lord over life and death. He is supposed to have power over sickness and health, birth and barrenness. Yet it is the God of Israel who actually cares enough and has the power to heal and to give life. Baal is a fraud, and Elisha continues, in the path of his master Elijah, to show him as such.

Then again, there is a way in which God's interest in ordinary people and their domestic problems also bears a political, social, and religious message. The kings of Israel bear great responsibility for their unfaithfulness and the influence they have on the unfaithfulness of the people. But ultimately, it is the unfaithfulness of the whole people that brings judgment upon them. Whether you agree with his politics or not, Tip O'Neill was right. "All politics is local." We tend to focus on the big stuff, because we just don't have the ability to see all the little stuff going on in every life, every family. But God sees it all, and it is all important to him.

The miracles of Jesus are the same way. He has a mission to accomplish that will change the entire world. But he also knows that changing the world is about changing individual lives. The good news that he preaches isn't just a message that will affect the politicians and great men. It touches people in their personal lives. It heals. And so he applies the good news to individuals as he goes along. He doesn't allow them to sidetrack his mission. But he heals the sick and frees those who are possessed by demons, because ultimately, that's what his mission is about.

No matter what the prevailing winds of politics and society are, there is no other God than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is no other God than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no power that can overcome him, and there is no power that can withstand him. He is the only master of life and death. He is the only master of health and wealth. He is the only master of the destiny of his creation.

But he also cares about you and your family. He cares about your welfare. He cares about your day in, day out happiness and health. He cares about whether you can pay your bills, and how your relationship with your kids is shaping up, and how you feel at the end of the day. There is nothing that can hide you from his consideration, and nothing that can make him love you any more than he does.

You may or may not like what he thinks or does about all of this. But he is always working toward your well-being.

