

July 1st, 2007

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Today's sermon is really a challenge to each of you. I want to challenge you to be observant about a particularity in our lessons each Sunday mornings. Before church begins, when you vaguely peruse the readings in the bulletin, if you vaguely peruse the readings, I challenge you to ask, "What's missing." Very often, in our lectionary, there are one or two verses that are omitted from a reading. And they are usually missing for some troubling reason: either God doesn't come off so well, tres vengeful, or there is a reference to something that seems out of place. But I even want you to do more. Do research. When you go home, find out what is missing, and ask the question of why and answer it. Be a good conspiracy theorist and assume that the lectionary crafters have cruelly hidden something important from you. Because, that is what I want to talk about today: what is missing from our readings. Follow along as I go through them. Pay attention. Because the Good News of God is often to be found in the missing parts.

In our reading from the first book of the Kings, we are missing verses 17 and 18. That much, I hope is self-evident. But we are also missing something else: context, and the context is not only important, it is a great epic narrative, a story. I have to confess, though, that even as your priest, I had to refresh my understanding of Elijah: thank you theologian James Alison. But in a condensed format, here are the highlights from Elijah. First, Elijah is a prophet at a time when Israel is succumbing to the lower case "g" gods. Even the king has been worshiping the god Baal. Elijah, as one might understand, becomes a bit frustrated at this reality, and in his anguish, he challenges the bad Baal priests to a battle of the gods on Mount Carmel. There, both the Baal priests and Elijah are asked to summon fire from heaven. The Baalites are first and predictably spark-less. Poor, poor Baalites. Elijah, in his best elementary school voice, taunts them. He teases that perhaps, Baal is indisposed in the restroom, taking a number two. Elijah then douses his wood with water and still easily summons fire from heaven. And the proof and the poof are in the coals. Everyone proceeds to dispose of the allegedly indisposed Baal and worships God instead. Elijah, though, does not rest on his ember laurels. He points his finger at four hundred of the Baal priests and demands that they be killed, and they are. So much for the loving God.

For even Elijah, victory is bittersweet. He has brought the people back to God, but only through tricks and murder, and he falls into depression and dejection. He cannot eat. He has an existential crisis. An angel comes to him and convinces him to go to Mount Horeb. Elijah goes to a cave and camps out. He waits for God to appear. There is earthquake, wind, and fire, but God is not in those. God, instead, comes in a still, small voice and tells Elijah the passage we heard today. Go and appoint a new king. In that moment, we see a new Elijah, a better Elijah. He suddenly sees the real God: a God that speaks to us in a still small voice, even when we think God is in earthquakes and the murder of 400 heathen priest. We have been missing the context and Elijah has been missing the real God. And in this moment, we finally see him understand.

But Elijah's understanding is brief. Old habits die hard, and there are the passages we miss in the reading. In them, we can see Elijah going seesawing: God is vengeance, God is love. And the

passage reads “Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the word of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.” If we miss these words, and we miss the context of the prophet, we eventually miss the real Elijah, his ambivalence, and his attempts to really understand God. We also miss something else. We miss seeing how he represents us all, our struggles to find the true, loving God and the pitfalls in the process.

There is also something missing in our second lesson in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. There should be one more verse at the end, though perhaps that is a bit more tricky. But it points to something very true. Often, what is missing in a text we hear is right before or after it. We need to know what is around these stories. And the last phrase is this: “Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.” Now, I don’t know about you, but when I heard this reading as presented, I heard a list of things that sounded like fun, though Paul seems very judgmental about them: “licentiousness, drunkenness, carousing,”. And then, there is a list of things that are supposedly good, but they just make me want to be naughty, things like, “self-control.” It all sounds like Paul is really telling us what to do, as some maligned do-gooder, the Paul we all like to dislike. But Paul is really engaging in an intense theological argument against those who have become legalistic in their faith. He claims instead that it is not a question of do this or do that, it is a question of motivations. Most of our actions are a result of what our motivations are. Wanting God helps us find God and joy while following competition and envy produces the need for numbing agents, like drunkenness and like Elijah’s crisis. But the point is that Paul is not shaking a shame finger at us. He is attempting to get us to look at our lives, to think about where they going. And without the last line, we are missing the fullness of what he says because we are missing the conclusions for both sorts of actions.

Then, there is the Gospel. And just so you know, all the verses are there, and yet there is still something missing: a good translation! But the verse that reads, “on their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem,” is often misunderstood because the English is misleading. Most people tend to read this as the Samaritans rejecting Jesus. The disciples certainly seemed to think so. They ask Jesus to punish them, bad Samaritans. But the way that the Greek works, it is really more like visiting a Great Aunt. Jesus wanted to stop by, it was on his list of things to do, but he was in a hurry. He had to get to Jerusalem. The disciples, and even we, are often eager to read enmity into this event, when it is not there. Though there was indeed enmity between Jews and Samaritans at the time, Jesus is NOT participating in it. And Jesus despairs when his followers do. And so Jesus makes the point that he will not rule with power but instead love and forgive as a way of transforming corrupt power. A better translation might make this easier to see.

Ultimately, what is missing is important. The exercise of finding what is missing is not just some grammatical magic trick. Instead, what is missing is the point of Christianity. Jesus tries to get us to look at the world and reach those who are generally missing from our vision. What if Elijah had compassion for the misled priests of Baal? What if he served as a still small voice to them? What if we really understood Paul’s earnest point that the reasons we act, whether out of competition or love, often produce those same respective results. And what if we understood

that God, that Jesus, is not and has never been in the business of passing by a group of people as a form of rejection. Being a Christian compels us to ask who and what are we missing. It is central to who we are because we worship a man who was misplaced on a cross and mislabeled as a criminal. Mathematically, and spiritually, only when we find what we are missing, only when we see the real loving God, only when we understand in our own selves the link between our motivations and our actions, and only when we work toward no enmity between any people, can we really say that we are whole and holy, and that nothing, not one thing or person, is missing.