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I Kings 17:8-24, Luke 7:11-17
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

“Life from God”

In his book, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, Mark Noll notes that the Civil War provoked a crisis in the interpretation of Scripture. In the 19th Century, religion was a powerful force in American life and the Bible was the pre-eminent authority in moral and social affairs. Noll writes, “The Book that made the nation was destroying the nation.” (p.8). Of course, in actual fact, it wasn’t “The Book” that was tearing the country apart; it was the way in which various factions and parties interpreted “The Book.” The intellectual, religious and political life of America was consumed with the issue of slavery. Based on their interpretation of the Bible, many preachers and politicians, social reformers and soldiers, claimed to know the truth about slavery and God’s providential hand in human affairs. The supporters of slavery and the foes of slavery, the unionists and the secessionists, could all quote the Bible and claim God’s authority in defense of their views. Mark Noll concludes that in all sides of the debate, economic self-interest, political ideology and geographical loyalties played a far larger role in the interpretation of Scripture than any of the interpreters would admit.

The cacophony of voices only served to weaken the role of Scripture in our nation. With so many people speaking for God’s intentions in the world, how do we know what is the word of God in a given time or particular situation? If this history teaches us anything, it teaches us how easily we are deceived by our own self-interest and how diligently we must seek to know God’s word in a particular situation.

In our Scripture lessons this morning, we hear about two times of theological crisis. In the time of the prophet Elijah, the royal court, led by the power hungry King Ahab and his scheming wife Queen Jezebel, was enamored with the false prophets of Baal. A severe drought and famine had come upon the land. What was God’s word to the people in this time of suffering? What was God doing?

One thing that God was doing was keeping the prophet Elijah alive and providing for his needs. God led him to water to drink and commanded the ravens to feed him. God sent Elijah away from Israel, beyond the grasp of Ahab, to the Phoenician town of Zarephath. The drought and famine had reached Zarephath as well. A starving widow and her son, who were about to eat their last meal from a bit of flour and oil, shared her food with Elijah. God blessed the woman and promised that the jar of meal and the jug of oil would not run out until the drought ended. In a famine, she sacrificed what she had to give life to another.

Then the widow’s son took ill and died. Elijah asked the question that must have been in everyone’s mind, “What are you doing God? Are you the cause of all this suffering and death? Now are you taking the life of this poor woman’s only son?” Through the actions of the prophet Elijah, God answered the question by restoring life to the boy. What was God doing? In the midst of famine and death, God was restoring life. The gift of her son’s life led the woman to confess that Elijah was a man of God and that “the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” (I Kings 17:24)

The ministry of Jesus began a crisis of belief. Over and over again the Gospels raise the question of the identity of Jesus. Is he from God or does he speak blasphemy? Who is this whom the forces of nature and the evil spirits obey? How do the people know if he speaks the truth?

Luke tells us that Jesus met a funeral procession passing through town to the cemetery. The mourners were going to bury a widow’s only son. Jesus saw the woman’s profound grief and was moved to compassion. He touched the bier and said to the young man, “Rise.” The man sat up and began to speak. God gave him life again. The crowd knew the truth when they saw it. They shouted, “A great prophet has risen among us!” They knew that this was the work of God.

How do we know the truth of what God is doing among us? We look for key patterns of what God has done in the Scrip-

tures and we can trust that God is doing the same things among us. In these two stories, one from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the Gospels, we see the hand of God at work bringing life to the dead. Did you notice that in both stories, the mothers are described as widows and their sons appear to be their only children? In that culture, to have no one to carry on the father's name was to be cut off from the promise of God to give Abraham and Sarah as many descendants as the stars in the sky or the sand on shore. God comes to desperate situations as a force for life. As I read these stories, the life God gives is abundant life - physical, spiritual, communal, eternal - resurrected life that begins now and never ends.

In all the conflicting theological and biblical rhetoric that swirled around the Civil War, it was Abraham Lincoln who proved to be one of the best theologians of his time. He discerned the true pattern of God's word and God's actions. In his Second Inaugural Address, he recognized that both sides prayed to the same God and claimed the moral rightness of their causes. Both could not be right. Lincoln surmised that the war was possibly the terrible price a society must pay for generations of injustice against the African slave. Lincoln knew where to look to see what God was doing as the war drew to its inevitable close. He saw God's hand in restoring life to a weary and war-torn land. In his closing words, Lincoln said:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Lincoln knew that the consistent thing that God was doing among them was healing the wounds, reconciling enemies and giving new life to the people.

We are a resurrected people. Jesus has touched our lives and made us whole again. We have been brought back from the death of sin to a new life with God. As Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20). As a resurrected people, we join with God in giving life to the world.

This life from God takes many forms. As Elijah and Jesus fed the hungry, so we carry out our ministries with the hungry here and around the world. On the third Sunday of each month, some of our members rise early and travel to the Shepherd Center, where they prepare breakfast for the children as they come to church. The children in that community do not always have food in their homes. Christ's resurrected people offer life in the form of food and a caring welcome.

This life from God can appear in acts of healing and compassion. Even as we worship this morning, some of our members are arriving today in Kenya to visit the Moi University hospital and health and nutrition programs. Led by Dr. David and Emily Matthews, our members are building life-giving relationships and looking for ways in which we can share Christ's life in partnership together. In the coming year we will be supporting the development of the Mother Child Hospital and an interfaith rural health and nutrition program. They are sharing in God's work of healing.

It is so easy for the church of Jesus Christ to get confused about the essential nature of the word of God. We see the word of God incarnate in the life of Jesus. When we need to know what that word looks like, what the word says and how the word calls us to live, we look to Jesus. As I see Jesus revealed through the Scriptures, I see him manifest as the giver of abundant life through his teaching, his healing, his comforting presence, his feeding, his forgiving love and even through his dying.

There always seem to be plenty of preachers around who would distract the church from its true calling to live in the power of this abundant life and to invite others into this abundant life. I have known ministers who spend all their air time talking about unusual interpretations of obscure texts and focusing on bizarre practices until people think that the church is a bunch of nuts who are obsessed with serpents and beasts, drink poison and handle snakes. I have told some of you about a minister in eastern North Carolina, who spent most of his time and energy trying to get an article published in which he

claimed to prove that you can love God without having to love your neighbor. I have heard ministers turn the good news of Jesus Christ into bad news by seeming to delight in how hurricanes, tornadoes and terrorist attacks are God's judgment on particular sins they deplore. I have heard some preachers lick their lips in glee over how many people are going to hell because Jesus rose from the dead. I think they have the message wrong. This is not the Gospel truth.

How do we know the truth? We look to what we see the consistent pattern of God is doing in Scripture and we know that pattern is truth. We confirm the truth of what we see by holding what we see up to the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When the pattern fits, we know it to be true. The Gospel truth is that God is bringing life to a dying world. The truth is that God gives life - abundant life now and in the world to come. This is the life that God has called us to share with the world.

The Scottish runner Eric Liddell's athletic skill and faith were celebrated in the movie, "Chariots of Fire." He created a sensation by refusing to complete in races scheduled for Sundays. Nevertheless, he won the gold medal in the 400 meter race at the 1924 Paris Olympics. We are less familiar with the fact that he spent the rest of his life as a missionary in China, where he met and married his wife Flo. When WWII broke out, his wife and children went to Canada. In 1943, the Japanese took him and the remaining foreigners from hostile nations to internment camps. At the prison camp in Shantung province, the conditions were hard, food was scarce and morale was low. Yet, Eric Liddell became known throughout the camp as a force for life. He organized athletic activities for the youth of the camp, gave his time tirelessly to idle and troubled teenagers who had no parents with them, and led worship and Bible studies. He never gave up no matter how difficult the circumstances and how big the challenges. In May of 1945, while he was still in the prison camp, 43 year old Eric Liddell died of a brain tumor.

You or I may say it was a tragedy. That is not what his family and those who know him well said. They said it was a triumph because his life embodied the truth of God.