



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

SUMMER BLOCKBUSTERS

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With Father's Day here and people graduating all over the place, that can only mean one thing: Summer is here. I realize we still have a few days until the OFFICIAL start of summer and it doesn't LOOK like summer out there, but everyone's already starting to get that summertime attitude. People break out the flip flops and the shorts. I notice most of you have stopped wearing your suits and ties to church...

Actually, summer is a very interesting time to be a church in Washington. As soon as that sun comes out, people hit the road. And I'm learning that some people go to other places besides Minnesota. When we were just getting started, it used to be like having a different congregation every week, because one group would be taking vacations one Sunday, then the other half of our little group would be gone the next Sunday.

That's just how summer is. Of course, for those of us not taking the long vacations, there are always those summer blockbusters, the big movies that come out every year. Sometimes nothing sounds better on a hot day than to go sit in an air conditioned theater for a couple hours.

But if you look at the lineup for this summer, most of them aren't very original. They're all sequels or remakes. There's another Shrek movie, another Fantastic 4 movie, another Transformers movie, another Harry Potter movie, another Pirates of the Caribbean movie, another Die Hard movie, the Bourne Ultimatum and Ocean's 13. Plus remakes of Hairspray and Underdog. Come on – where's the creativity? We already know the storylines when we walk in.

So I'm happy to announce that here at New Day, we've got a summer lineup of incredibly original summer blockbusters. We're going to spend the next several weeks looking at the lives of Elijah and Elisha – two Old Testament prophets whose experiences were so spectacular they could make a whole string of movies about these two that would take the best special effects people in the business. They are blockbusters in and of themselves. Seriously – some of the most amazing stories of the Bible come out of their lives. You read one story and go "That's wild." Then you turn the page and there's another one even more incredible. So it should make for a very interesting summer.

When I'm starting a new series of messages, I usually order a few books to do some research and get my background material. I'll be honest with you: most of the time,

they're pretty dry books. They may have a few good points I can pick through and make use of, but I normally have to wade through a lot of big words to get to a few gems. But with this series on Elijah and Elisha, every single book I ordered had great insights. Not just good information, but powerful electrifying kind of reading that makes you want to stand up and shout. I told Karin this is the kind of stuff that gets me fired up about preaching.

It isn't just that Elijah and Elisha had fascinating lives – it's that their words and actions speak so directly to us thousands of years later. When we get past the drama and the fireworks and drill down to what they were communicating, it can hit us with as much conviction and punch as it did their original hearers.

So I am really looking forward to this journey with you over the next several weeks. To catch up with these boys we're going to drop into the middle of the book of 1 Kings. Since we're going to be concentrating on just a couple books of the Old Testament this summer, I'd encourage you to bring your own Bible each week to follow along and get familiar with the context of the stories. We won't have time for every great story out of their lives, so you'll want to read the passages in between to see what else happens.

1 Kings 16:29-17:6

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years.

Just a brief history lesson here: As you probably know, Israel was a nation made up of 12 tribes. They survived as a people through 400 years of slavery in Egypt, 40 years in the desert and then for a number of years in the promised land under King Saul, King David and King Solomon. Solomon grew powerful and wealthy, and he walked away from God. He forgot who gave him everything he had. So God said, "That's it. I'm going to break up this kingdom." Ten tribes became Israel, and two tribes became Judah. The nation remained divided like that until they were taken into captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Judah kept Jerusalem as their capitol, while Israel made Samaria their center of power. Samaria was well situated on the top of a hill so it was easy to defend. You can still see ruins of it from that time if you go visit their today.

The books of 1 and 2 Kings record the history of these two kingdoms for the 400 or so years that they were divided. So the author will talk about the king of one nation to give a landmark for when a king of the other nation took the throne. So when Asa had been king for 38 years in Judah, Ahab became king of Israel. Here's what it said about Ahab.

Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.

In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the LORD spoken by Joshua son of Nun.

A man named Kurt Waldheim passed away this week. Mr. Waldheim had served as the secretary general of the United Nations for 10 years. He also served as Austria's president. He was a man of incredible political influence.

But his accomplishments were overshadowed by the discovery that he had served with the Nazis during World War II. Any good he did could not erase the black mark on his record, because Hitler's atrocities had been so terrible.

Ahab was an accomplished king. He stayed on the throne for 22 years, which in itself is remarkable. Economically speaking, the nation did well under his rule. He carried out a lot of building programs, restoring cities and the people grew wealthy through his alliances. But nothing could erase the terrible choices he made. Everything else paled in comparison to the evil he did.

For political reasons, he married Jezebel, the daughter of another king. Even today her name means bad news. God had specifically warned the Israelites to not get romantically involved with those other nations – not because of any racial prejudice, but because they all had their own idols they worshipped and God knew that could spell trouble. And it did. Jezebel was a devoted follower of Baal, and she convinced Ahab to convert Israel to Baalism.

What Ahab did is described as being the worst ever – way worse than the earlier king Jeroboam, who had also abandoned God. Jeroboam manufactured some idols for Israel to worship. As evil as that was, Ahab's introduction of Baal was even more sinister. Dale Ralph Davis describes the difference this way:

Jeroboam's state cult is like drinking polluted water; Ahab's imported paganism is like sucking raw sewage. Neither is good, but one is worse than the other.

Not only did Ahab bring Baal to Israel, Jezebel started systematically killing off the Lord's prophets. They weren't just introducing their own religion – they were out to destroy belief in God. Jezebel sought to eliminate the people who would stand up and say anything against her.

It was a dark, dark time in Israel. What was happening throughout the country was wrong on many, many levels. Not only were the people blatantly sinning, something else was happening: They were in danger of losing their identity.

Israel was known as God's special, chosen people. They had a unique relationship to him. I love the way Deuteronomy describes God's choosing of them:

Deuteronomy 7:7-8

GOD wasn't attracted to you and didn't choose you because you were big and important — the fact is, there was almost nothing to you. He did it out of sheer love, keeping the promise he made to your ancestors.

God just loved these people because he did. Plain and simple. But the people walked away from that love relationship. Not only had their internal unity as a country fallen apart, they abandoned the one thing that marked them as a distinct people – which was God himself. They lost sight of themselves and quickly were beginning to become like the surrounding nations.

Through what Jesus did on the cross, God has now expanded his chosen people to include us. He invited us into relationship. God gets upset with sin not just because he doesn't like it, but also because it means we are stepping outside of the loving relationship. When we sin we forget who we really are and what is ours. We are in danger of losing ourselves.

That's the way sin works – it chips away at who we really are and brings us down to the lowest common denominator. There is a sameness to sin, a boring predictability of where it leads. It starts out looking pretty good, but in the end it flattens us all out and robs us of our uniqueness.

The challenge for us is the same as it was for Israel: To cultivate a community that praises God and is obedient to him when everything around us would pull us away from that identity.

In our story, Ahab is the one doing the pulling. He is leading Israel down this path to self-destruction, and because of that, he's labeled as the worst king ever. He stirred up God's anger like nobody else. It says God was vexed by him. Can you think of anybody that makes you furious? I have a couple people like that, people that make my blood boil. I'm always having to ask God to help me with my attitude toward them. God was fully justified in his feelings about Ahab, and they ran deep.

I take comfort in the knowledge that God is so aware of what's going on that he gets that upset. When things are bad, it's easy to think that God doesn't see my situation, or that he doesn't care. But he does. He feels it even more intensely than we do, because he knows better than we do what is at stake. Not only does God see it and feel it – he responds to it. Here's the next verse in our story:

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

This is the first mention of Elijah in the Bible. There's no lengthy introduction, no special credentials. We don't even know exactly where Tishbe was. Elijah just comes in out of nowhere to confront Ahab.

But his name itself is enough to change the air in the room. Because Elijah in Hebrew means “The Lord is my God.” Imagine Ahab’s secretary telling him who his next appointment was going to be that day. “Your majesty, your 3:00 is here – the Lord is my God wants to see you.” That name leaves no doubt that this is going to be a head-on confrontation.

The first words out of Elijah’s mouth are these: “As the LORD, the God of Israel lives.” Ahab has been doing everything in his power to erase the memory of God in the minds of the Israelites. He’s been killing off prophets, building temples to Baal, setting up Asherah poles and replacing God wherever he can. But Elijah says, “You can do whatever you want, paint the walls whatever color you want. It won’t change the fact that the Lord is my God, and my God is alive and well.” He’s no statue or carving like Baal. Elijah stakes all he has on the fact that God lives. And that should have Ahab quaking in his boots. Because if God is alive, that means he can see what’s happening. If he’s alive, that means he has power to respond when and where he chooses.

What does it mean for you and me that God is alive? He has energy and the capacity to act on our behalf. More than that, it means he has the ability to share that life with us.

When I had my previous car, also known as White Lightning, I had my share of turns with a dead battery. I eventually kept a pair of jumper cables with me at all times, just in case. Because when you’ve got a dead battery, the only thing that will help you is a connection to a live battery.

Jesus is like that live battery for us. He jumpstarts us and gives us another chance.

Revelation 1:18

I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

A living God has the ability to be the source of life – something Baal could never be. He was a carving, an inanimate chunk of rock. The prophet Habakkuk said,

Habakkuk 2:18-20

*Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.
Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'
Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!'
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.
But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.*

As surely as God lives, Elijah said. That's as sure as anything gets. It's the only thing to cling to when life is hard and overwhelming. God lives. God sees. God knows. God responds.

His response to Ahab came in the form of Elijah. Elijah represented the word of the Lord, staring the king in the face. Instead of challenging Ahab with an army or a miracle, he did it strictly with the power of his word. If you could put a big, overarching theme on Elijah's life, it would be the power of the word of God.

I'll never forget the scene in the movie "The Apostle." Robert Duvall plays a somewhat broken down preacher who's found a new ministry in the south, and he builds up this integrated church. Billy Bob Thornton plays a racist who can't stand the message of reconciliation that he's preaching, and one day, he drives up with a bulldozer, ready to tear the church down. Robert Duvall opens his Bible to Psalm 91 and reads, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." Then he walks up and places the open Bible on the ground in front of the bulldozer. He tells Billy Bob that if he's going to tear down the church, he's going to have to run over that Bible. There's a tense stand off that ends with Billy Bob breaking down in tears. Robert Duvall takes him over to that Bible and speaks God's forgiveness to him right there in front of the bulldozer. All the hate and the destructive power of that big machine was no match for the word of God.

That's the picture of Elijah in front of Ahab – The massive machinery of the king's power, brought to its knees by the spoken word of the Lord. That's why the author of Hebrews says

Hebrews 4:12-13

God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it — no matter what.

You want to know what the answer is to maintaining our identity as God's people? It's the word of God. You want to know how we can overcome the forces that are lined up against us? It's the word of God. You want to know how evil will be ultimately defeated in our lives and in the world? The word of God. That's all we've got. And it's more than enough. Are you thinking that sounds like a pat answer? It's not meant to be. Ask God to give you understanding, to reveal truth to you when you open your Bible, to give you ears to hear when he's speaking truth to you through someone else.

Jesus himself said it:

Matthew 4:4

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

And what does Elijah have to say to Ahab?

As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.

This is a direct assault on the credibility of Baal. Because Baal was the storm God. He was depicted as having a lightning bolt in his hands and called the “Rider of the clouds.” Elijah zeroed in on Baal’s claim to fame, and said that it wasn’t Baal’s at all. Only God is the source of water, and therefore life. Anybody who set themselves up as an alternative source is a pretender. Baal would be shown as completely powerless to help in the one area where he was supposed to have the most power.

This is the uncanny ability of God’s word. I call it **Convicting clarity**. It hits us with force in those very places where we’re most at odds with the truth. We usually hear God speaking to us where we least want him to – the spots in our life where we’re out of line with him, or where we’ve misplaced our faith in something else that can’t do anything for us. His word is devastating – right when we need it to be.

Derek told me a story a couple weeks ago, and I asked him if he’d be willing to share it with you this morning.

DEREK STORY

In a recent radio message, Beth Moore made the comment, “our enemy is a surveyor of walls.” He’s looking for low spots, places where we’re vulnerable. The word of God speaks to those spots, rebuilding us as it shines a light on them.

I said at the beginning that this was a very dark time in Israel’s history. There was a lot of reason for despair. Elijah comes in as God’s answer, but it doesn’t sound like much of a rescue. There’s going to be a massive drought. It’s going to be so bad, there won’t even be any dew. That’s not really a message that is going to make anyone feel better.

At least not right away. There is hope there, but it’s an **Unexpected hope**. The first glimmer of hope often looks more like a crisis. Have you ever thought about that? When someone first gets the diagnosis that they have a terrible disease, it’s not fun to hear. But what if it’s curable? The disease has to be discovered and labeled for it to be treated. Going along without knowing it might seem more pleasant for a while, but not if it kills you. It’s much better to know and endure the treatment. That’s hope.

Elijah’s message of drought is a harsh word, but it points to a way out of the darkness. There is still a future. God hasn’t given up on his people. The next time he speaks, it will be to bless them with rain again. But the way to get to the good is through the struggle, and waiting for the word from God. Would they be willing to wait? Are we willing to wait for that word from him? Philip Yancey says, “*Dependence. Sorrow. Repentance. A longing to change. These are the gates to God’s kingdom.*”

Hope sometimes comes in the form of a crisis. What crisis are you facing this morning? Maybe God is speaking to you in it and saying “If you’ll walk with me through to the other side of this, you’ll see the way.” The rains will come.

When you think about just what Elijah did that day, it was an incredibly bold and brave thing. To be so straightforward with the king was to risk death. If Ahab didn’t kill him, chances were that the drought would. He could have died of thirst or starvation like other people in Israel would. But look what happened:

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there."

So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

Judgment and hope had been the word of the Lord to Ahab and Israel. Now the word comes to Elijah and it has another message: God provides. It’s a **Total provision**. He took care of his fears and he took care of his physical needs. He provides a hiding place for Elijah where he’ll be safe. He provides a brook that will give him water when there is none. He provides food out of nowhere.

That is God’s word to us as well. He offers us his protection from death. He offers us the bread of life and the living water. God has infinite resources to take care of us if we’re willing to trust him. He can handle our fears and our physical needs.

Beyond provision, God’s word to Elijah shows his **incredible creativity**. God says it so matter of factly. “I’ve ordered the ravens to feed you.” As if that’s no big deal. Humans have trained animals to do a lot of things, but sharing their food isn’t generally one of them. That possibility wouldn’t have even crossed Elijah’s mind. Not only that, ravens were considered unclean according to Jewish laws. They were off limits. But God says, “Nothing is off limits to me. I can make anything clean and usable that I want to.”

Have you ever felt like you were a raven – unclean and unusable? Don’t underestimate God’s creativity. It was by his word that he made the world and it’s by his word that he remakes each one of us. He speaks and it is. And when he says he can use something, he can.

He is always catching us by surprise. God chooses to do things in ways we would never even dream of. My parents came up to visit on Wednesday night so they could attend Isaac’s last band concert of the year. On the way to the concert, my dad asked me, “Do you ever run into Mark and Debbie?” They were a couple from his church who moved up this way from Lacey. My dad had completely lost touch with them and had been praying that God would somehow let him track them down.

I dismissed the question. I didn't even know remember who Mark and Debbie were, and they'd never visited New Day or anything. That was the end of the conversation as far as I was concerned. We went into the school gym and sat down to wait for the concert, when who should walk right in front of my dad, but Mark. And they had a significant reunion. In all the ways my dad had thought of to try and find this guy, going to the concert wasn't one of them.

God is so creative. We sit in despair with our small ideas of what is possible. We have a limited concept of what God can do to help. His word to us invites us to expand our imaginations.

Our God is the God of the impossible.

Ephesians 3:20

God can do anything, you know — far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams!

Throughout all of history, God's people have needed one thing over and over again, and that is to have the word of God spoken directly into their particular situation. To hear the living God say, "This will not stand. I have a better way. I have a better future for you. And I have more resources to help you than you'll ever know or believe. Watch me."

I'd like to pray for us as we close and what I'd like to do is pray for the effects of God's word on each of us. If I come to an area that you want prayed for you, I'm going to ask you to just slip up your hand at that time to be a symbol of what you're asking of God today.

Maybe you're here today and something I said about God seeing your situation struck you. Maybe you need that assurance that he's aware of the trouble you're in. If you're just saying, "God, please notice me this morning," will you raise your hand so I can pray for you?

We said that the word of God represents hope. If you're feeling a little desperate today and you're needing a word of hope this morning, would you raise your hand?

God's word also can mean conviction. Maybe God has been speaking to you about something in your life and you're really wrestling with it right now. If you'd like prayer for that, would you raise your hand?

God has endless resources at his disposal. If you're needing God's provision this morning, will you raise your hand?

God's word also shows just how creative he is. Maybe you're having a hard time seeing beyond the 4 walls of the box you're in. Maybe it's that you can't see how you can

possibly be of any use to God. If you'd like God to expand your imagination and help you know his creativity, would you raise your hand?