

"A Good Retirement Plan"
(sermon given 6/27/10 by Scott Jansen)
2 Kings 2:1-14

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[Prayer for Illumination] O Lord, our Redeemer and Savior, look upon our worship with favor. We come to connect with your Spirit. Let us find a sense of eternity in this time together.... Amen.

Last week we talked about Elijah feeling worn out and wanting to die, and how God told him, through a still small voice, to anoint Elisha as chief Prophet in his place.... This week, we continue their story. Listen now, for God's word for you....

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho.

The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on.

Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not...." As they continued walking and talking..., a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven....

Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

He picked up the mantle of Elijah, that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

The world is full of people who want to help you plan for your retirement. I've recently realized that most of my years in the work force are probably behind me. (One recognizes this more quickly if you get a haircut and then see that you only lost a teaspoon full of hair.) Not that I'm planning to retire any time soon..., but I do like to plan ahead. I'm not a last-minute, spontaneous kind of guy.

If you make an appointment with an expert... to discuss your retirement plans, you'll be asked about your long-term goals. Where do you want to live, in what kind of housing? What travel plans do you have? How often do you want to eat out, or go golfing, or to the theater, that sort of thing....

What's your portrait of a good retirement plan???? If you get to live in your dream home, with excellent health insurance, and drop-in volleyball matches running twenty-four hours a day???? I don't know. I suppose everyone has a different vision of the ideal retirement plan.

But how much faith can you really put into such plans???? I've heard that many people have pension plans wrapped up in BP stock, and that it's possible that BP might go bankrupt. And it wouldn't be the first time for such a nightmare.

So..., one strategy would be to forget about the long-term future... and just live in the now. There are lots of “experts” who talk about the “power of the now,” and living as if there were only now. Is that a good strategy????

As you may know, I’m a fan of the New York Giants. Last week, they signed their rookie draft choice, Chad Jones, to a nice contract making about a million dollars a year. Can you imagine graduating from college and walking straight into a job making a million a year???? Imagine being 21 years old and being set for life..... On Friday, a “rejoicing” Chad Jones lost control of his car and hit a street pole, ending his football career—he may never walk again. So much for living in the power of the now....

I also had a “power-of-the-now” moment yesterday. I was working on this sermon, was in a good flow of creative energy, was enjoying the moment, enjoying the flow, and just typing away for a couple of hours, when boom, just like that, the power went dead. I knew that God was “not in the storm,” but I must admit, I called upon the name of Jesus, anyway.... And then I realized why Jesus is the wisest person of all time—because Jesus saves....

So, just living in the moment doesn’t always work out too well. On the other hand, if you always live for tomorrow and never seize the joy that is available in the present, you may miss out. For example, you may have been planning to play with some toy in your basement when you got to your retirement, but after the floods on Wednesday, your plans may have changed. I suspect that a lot of plans changed this Wednesday evening.

It seems, if you live just for the moment, you may get burned; and if you live just for the future, you may get burned.... So, what’s the answer? What makes for a good retirement plan?

I want to suggest that a good retirement plan is one that connects you with eternity. A good retirement plan connects you with eternity. That’s what Elijah was doing as he wandered around Israel walking and talking with Elisha. On his last day on this Earth, Elijah decided to go for a walk—a forty-mile walk, by the way. Not that he was trying to get some exercise on the last day of his life.

So, what was he trying to do??? I think it’s no accident that Elijah made appearances in all of the places where there were high concentrations of prophets dedicated to Yahweh. In those days, when a king, or a religious leader, would die without leaving a son to take his place, there was often a lot of bloodshed to determine who would

be the successor. By parading Elisha around before all of Elisha's potential rivals, Elijah was making it perfectly clear who God wanted to take his place.

But he didn't just prepare the people to accept Elisha. He also prepared Elisha to grasp the role of leader. He put Elisha to the test at each stop. Each time the two of them surveyed the other potential chief prophets, Elijah asked Elisha, in essence, if he still wanted to go through with it. Only after seeing all the other prophets, does Elisha finally ask Elijah to inherit a double share of his spirit.

That phrase, "inherit a double share," may not be familiar. It was the custom back then to split up inheritances into equal shares, but to give the eldest son, or the favorite son, a double share. So if there were five sons, the youngest four sons would each get one sixth, while the eldest son would get two sixths. But, more importantly, the son with the double share also received any title or office or leadership authority that once rested with the father. So, after God commanded Elijah to anoint Elisha to be prophet in his place, and after Elijah brought Elisha to meetings with the other prophets, Elisha finally agreed, and asked to become the next chief prophet.

And, while a forty-mile walk may strike you as a form of "hazing," it does seem that it helped Elisha to find the confidence he needed to perform his duties.

But I want to look at what Elijah did with his retirement, and see if that holds any lessons for us. Elijah's goal was not to live the most comfortable life possible until God took him. He knew that his work as prophet was over—God had told him that. But rather than focussing on himself in his retirement days, he tried to do everything he could to empower the younger generation to carry on God's mission....

Notice that, because of the lectionary, there are millions upon millions of Christians today reading the story of Elijah and celebrating his memory. But if Elijah had been self-centered in his retirement, if he had just thought about staying comfortable until his death, if he had not gone on that forty-mile hike with Elisha, then Elisha may not have developed into the confident and powerful leader that he became. And that was a scary time. Jezebel held power in Israel, and the religions of Baal and Molech and Ashterah were threatening to extinguish the Hebrew faith. Without strong leadership from Elisha, Jezebel probably would have succeeded. In other words, if Elijah had

cared more about his own comforts, than about the eternal mission of God..., no one today would even recognize the name "Elijah."...

So when I say that a good retirement plan connects you with eternity, I mean that what you do with your retirement will make a huge difference in how you are remembered. Let's face it, retired folks hold the vast majority of the resources that can make a difference in God's mission. Available time to volunteer, as well as money, and also the wisdom and experience—they all tend to be more concentrated in the hands of those who are retired.

So, it's in our own best interest to do something with those resources to make our lives more meaningful. Why is a meaningful life in our best interest? Well, first of all, the effort to simply take care of our own creature comforts doesn't always work out too well. For example, in the French Revolution, those who were most focused on their own selfish comforts, with no regard to the plight of others, wound up beheaded.... And, I'm not saying that many in our time are in jeopardy of losing their heads, but the resentment that sometimes exists between people can be a huge barrier that prevents joyful relationships from ever forming. That was the sort of barrier that Jesus was often trying to knock down.

In our culture, we idolize youth. We spend all kinds of money trying to appear younger. So, those who actually are young have a hard time imagining that retired folks have any value, especially if the retired folks seem greedy and self-centered. Of course, the younger generation often misses the opportunity to glean the wisdom of the older generation because of this cultural stigma. It's not like that in Japan. But here, how many young Elishas do we see today, who follow their masters around wherever they go, and refuse to leave their side even when ordered to do so? Yet, without Elisha's loyalty to Elijah, he would have remained a nobody.

Younger folks today often avoid mixing with older folks, and thereby they cut themselves off from eternity. They prefer to live in the now—glorying in their youth. And, in that way, they set themselves up for a lifetime of failure. If being young and popular and beautiful is all that really matters, then how do you avoid becoming depressed as you slowly get older and older and older? You can't win that game. When you cut yourself off from the values of eternity, you have nowhere to go but down.

The young need to develop values that will last, values that can lead to more and more joy, to a lifetime of building achievements.

Elisha wasn't afraid to be seen walking around with Elijah—even in front of all of his friends....

And the older generation needs to ponder the question that Elijah asked. Not, how can I maximize my own comfort, but rather, how can I best empower the younger generation to continue to contribute to something meaningful, something good, something eternal?

I know you won't hear this from many so-called "experts" in the field of financial planning, but the Church has officially said that it's not a good strategy to have too much money during your retirement. Rather than hold everything until you die and then distribute the leftovers through your will, a far better strategy is to give away money while you're still alive. Empower your kids when they most need your help. Empower the church, and other charitable institutions while you can still spend a little time basking in their appreciation. Elijah asked Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." What a great question!

Why wait until you die to become generous? What do you gain by that??? I know. There is fear. The fear is that if you give it away too soon, you may wind up running out. That's a legitimate fear. But consider this—if you surround yourself by people whom you have empowered, people who love and appreciate you deeply, don't you think someone would take care of you if it turns out unexpectedly that you need it???? And, whether it gets to that point or not, wouldn't it be better to surround yourself with love, than to surround yourself with money?

In other words, whether you're young, middle age, or old, your values should reflect eternity. You're so much better off, spiritually, emotionally, if your values reflect eternity.

And remember, Jesus didn't have a fancy home, or stocks and bonds, or terrific health insurance. But he sure had a good retirement plan.

Amen.