

**SERMON SERIES: THE WALKING DEAD 1**  
**1 KINGS 16-17**  
**FEBRUARY 28, 2016**

We have reached peak zombie status in our country. Maybe you weren't aware of this but zombies are very cool right now. Books, movies, TV shows, comics, zombies are everywhere. *World War Z* was a hugely popular book that became a movie making \$500 million worldwide. I'm not sure if you saw this, but a movie just came out called *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies*, and it is exactly what you think it is. Zombies are so popular, they are even infiltrating Jane Austen novels.

The current zombie craze really took off because of the wild popularity of a television show called the *Walking Dead*. This TV show is in its sixth season. In its fifth season, it was the highest watched show on TV. A show about zombies was the highest rated show on TV. Lest you think this is the recommendation to watch the show, it is not. I like it. You probably won't. It is gory and dark. A short synopsis: *The Walking Dead* is about a dystopian future where zombies are infesting the planet. When people die, they turn in to flesh eating zombies. That's all they want to do is consume. It's their one thing to wander around looking for someone to consume. If you get bit, you also turn into a zombie. That's it. The whole show then, is about survival, different locales, different people. Stay alive. Survive.

Now, you say, how can a show about zombies be so popular for so long? Well, here is the secret, the show isn't about zombies, it's about people. The title of the show is really a pun; *The Walking Dead* has a double meaning. This show isn't really about zombies it's about people. As the living struggle to survive, something strange happens, they have to constantly fight to stay human. Not just by not being bitten. I mean they have to struggle to be humane and preserve their humanity. As the goal becomes to stay alive at all costs, they can quickly lose their own life as they seek to preserve it.

This comes to a head on a regular basis. The group comes to moral conundrums wherein they have to decide whether to leave someone behind. They come to these ethical forks-in-the-road wherein they must decide whether they will share their resources, whether they will slow down so that someone else can keep up. Will they be violent against the living? The question really comes to how far are they willing to go to preserve their own life? The concept of the show is that if they aren't careful, this group of survivors will become the walking dead. They don't have to be bitten, they just have to lose their humanity. Although they are not zombies, the nature of survival, the nature of the world they live in will lead them to lose the very thing they are trying to keep. While they still may have a pulse and breath air in their lungs, by the very definition of alive, they can quickly become the walking dead.

It would be easy to do a sermon series called "The Walking Dead" to talk about how the lost people of the world are zombies and those who have found God are truly alive. I want to go one step further. In a person-eat-person world, how do you maintain the person who God has called you to be? When you are constantly working to survive, you can lose the very thing you are trying to keep. Jesus told a story about this and said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"

I heard a great seminar on the soul by John Ortberg, who stole it from Dallas Willard, who stole it from Aquinas, who stole it from Augustine. The point is the credit isn't mine. This whole seminar was about your soul, and that is a confusing thing to understand. The major prevailing fallacy of the soul is the *Looney Tunes* fallacy. You know that moment when Daffy Duck takes a frying pan to the head and you see a ghost-like version of Daffy rising to the sky. That is the *Looney Tunes* fallacy, that your soul is some wispy version of you. That it is the ghostly version of you that will ascend to heaven when you die.

The problem is that's not what anyone using the word "soul" meant during the telling and composition of Biblical stories. The shorthand is this; your soul is your integrated self. It is your will, your brain, your body and your presence in this world. To greatly clarify this, Dallas Willard says that trees have souls, not that they have eternal spirits or conscience,

but a soul is simply the integrated being. A tree is made up of different parts performing different tasks, roots gathering nutrients, trunk providing core strength, branches with leaves reaching out for the sun, but it is still one integrated tree. That might sound simple because it is.

The problem for us, unlike a tree, is that we are prone to disintegrate. What we conjure in our will might agree with our thoughts but our body chooses different actions. To cover for our disintegration, we present ourselves in society in congruence with our will but incongruent with our actions/bodies. This is disintegration and it leads to a soul in disrepair. It's that ache that you feel when sin is comfortable in your life. When you want to do something good but you don't. When you want to avoid something bad but you don't. This is what leads Paul to say, "The things I want to do I don't do and the things I don't want to do I do." His, like ours, is often a disintegrating soul.

When Jesus says, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul," he is not just referring to the person who has lots of sex, money and pleasure, but spends eternity apart from God. He is talking about the person who is not integrated before God, one who is not a whole, complete soul that is at rest before God.

The perfect example of this, of course, is Gollum from the *Lord of the Rings* stories. He is that man who used to be Smiegal but he became enamored with a ring, a ring that represents great power. If you have that ring, you really could gain the whole world, and that ring turns Smiegal into Gollum. Golem is actually a Hebrew word in Psalm 139 that means unformed flesh, also known as the disintegrated person or one that is not fully formed. We can disintegrate and that is what Gollum does. He is the walking dead. He becomes something he was never meant to be. When Jesus says, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" That could be a point about eternity, but I think it is very much to do with the here and now. Losing the one thing that is most important can happen so easily. As we navigate this world, as we work to survive, we can forget who we are.

In college, my friends and I got into more than a few prank wars that almost always turned out well unless we set our eyes on each other. At one point, one of my friends took all of my clothes and mailed them to me through the campus mail system. I threw his mattress out the window. He threw eggs at my apartment door. I filled a trash bag with every heinous thing I could find and I was marching over to throw it at his door. It wasn't fun anymore and I was angry. Another friend saw me marching across the parking lot with my trash bag of fury and asked what I was doing. I explained what made sense in my mind of the escalating war. He then reminded me that I had started it and maybe, just maybe it had gotten a tad out of control. I slowed down. I stopped. It's one of those moments where life rushes by and you wonder, "How did I get here?"

On a far greater scale, some of you have watched things at work escalate wildly out of control and you are now in the throes of a cutthroat game of competition. Maybe you have had a moment, where you have wondered, "How did I get here?" Some of you have watched a neighborhood match of keeping up with the Joneses fly out of control and as you pull out the credit card one more time, you wonder, "How did I get here?" It can range from something as simple as road rage after a sig alert to something as large as rule bending to keep up in the work place. I'm guessing we have all had (hopefully before it was too late) a moment where we say, "How did we get here?"

If you are asking that question, you are on the right track, because your soul is flaring up. Your integrated self is crumbling because your thoughts and feelings of following Jesus are not lining up with the actions in your life. You mean well but it isn't panning out, and you have to cover for it in social spaces. That leads to extreme dissonance. You are a soul in disrepair.

It can happen, that easily. You can quickly become the walking dead. You can easily lose the one thing that is most valuable.

The promise of Jesus is new life. It is being reborn into a new creation, and as you are a new creation walking among people who have not yet woken up, you can become jaded, cynical,

broken and sinful. Your new life can start to look a lot like your old life, regardless of the fact that you are supposedly following Jesus. If we are not careful, we can become the walking dead, zombie-like as we wander through this life. Going to church on Sundays but no better for it. We are no better than the world around us. We adopt their values, their strategies and we can lose the very thing we wanted to keep. We can become so focused on winning and losing that we lose everything.

The most tangible talk of winning and losing at the moment is in our national politics. We have people on both sides of the aisle in this church, and I think that is the way that it should be. Here is what is interesting to me, candidates on both sides claiming to be Christian and people on both sides doing things that seem horribly un-Christian in hopes of winning, so they can bring Christian values to the White House. That is the very definition of gaining the whole world, becoming the leader of the free world, but losing your soul.

As we get ready for Easter, I want to take a few weeks with you and look at stories of resurrection. Before and after Jesus, in the New and Old Testaments, there are multiple stories of resurrection, of the walking dead, of people coming back to life. As we study some of these resurrections in preparation for the resurrection of Jesus, I want to be reminded about not losing that one thing. As we work to survive and spread the news of the kingdom of God, if we aren't careful we can gain the whole world and yet forfeit our souls. What can we learn about what it means to be truly being alive when we study the walking dead?

### *1 Kings 16: 29-33*

Ahab has the unique distinction of being called the worst king in Israel's history at least heretofore. Ahab married a woman named Jezebel, a princess of Phoenicia. This was likely a political move that led to spiritual problems. When God forbade intermarrying with other nations, it was not about ethnicity or skin color. It was about preserving the faith. When you marry someone with other gods, your faith can be diluted or even overcome. That is exactly what happens. Ahab begins to worship the two main gods of Tyre and Sidon, Baal and Asherah.

Baal was the god of harvest and rain. It makes sense to worship a god of harvest and rain in a primarily agrarian society. This was their lifeblood and what consumed most of their thoughts and minds. Asherah was the goddess of fertility. Primarily physical fertility concerned with the giving of life. If you wanted rain, you prayed to Baal, if you wanted a child, you prayed to Asherah. Asherah was honored by setting up Asherah poles, which were phallic symbols meant to honor this goddess who gives life.

Because of Ahab and Jezebel, there were temples, altars and poles all over Israel. This was a huge problem. The country was drowning in idolatry and something needed to change. This was when God sent Elijah to proclaim a drought for three and a half years. This was terrible news in an agrarian culture, and this is terrible news for Baal. Whenever there was a drought, the Phoenicians believed that Baal had died. They also believed he was capable of being resurrected by their prayers and callings, and so a drought meant Baal had died, or at the very least, he was having a bad day. Or maybe, just maybe, Baal didn't really control the on/off switch.

This leads Elijah on a journey of faith in God's protection and provision. If you missed it, I did a different sermon on Elijah after Christmas. If you would like more in depth on this story see our website. Today I want to focus on the resurrection that happens in this story.

God leads Elijah to a river where ravens bring him bread and meat twice a day. After awhile, God tells Elijah to leave there and go to Zarephath in the middle of Phoenicia, smack dab between Tyre and Sidon. This is enemy territory and he happens to be the man who called down the drought. This is the home place of Baal and Asherah, the rain and life-giving god and goddess.

God sends Elijah not to a powerful official or a rich leader of Zarephath but instead to a poor widow with one son. We have to jump over some of the details, but Elijah is told to audaciously ask one of the poorest and least powerful person in town to feed him. She has enough for one meal and is planning on her and her son's imminent death, but she agrees

to this audacious request. You know how the story goes; the flour and oil miraculously stay full enough to feed Elijah, the widow and her son.

This woman knows Elijah is a prophet for Yahweh, so this is a big moment for her. But she doesn't convert. She trusts in Baal, she is thankful to Asherah for her child, and then something life-changing happens.

### *1 Kings 17:17-24*

The widow's son dies. What a punch to the gut, to have no hope then to get hope and to have it dashed. She was preparing to die with her son, but then this man of God comes along, they are both saved, then the son dies from an illness. That's almost worse. Then... resurrection happens.

This woman says, "Now I know you are a man of God and that the word of truth is from the Lord." You are who you say you are. You are an integrated soul. Who you portray yourself as is who you really are. How you see yourself and how God sees you are one in the same.

Don't miss what happens in 1 Kings 17 and 18, Yahweh confronts two errors, Baal doesn't bring the rain and Asherah doesn't give life. In these two episodes, Yahweh upends their idols by doing what their false gods could not. At the heart of the narrative, we find resurrection. We find new life.

Here's what I don't want you to miss today. As we talk about the integrated soul, Elijah could have easily not prayed for this boy's life back. He could just as easily taken a moment to chastise this woman for her trust in Baal and Asherah, to show her she has indeed reaped the whirlwind. He could have had some resentment for this woman and everyone like her who worshiped these false gods and helped lead Israel astray.

This resurrection is about the nature of our God, it sets a pattern for the integration of your soul. God sends his prophet to the least powerful, least wealthy and most pagan person

around. Jesus makes special note of this in Luke 4. There were plenty of widows in Israel during the drought, but God sent Elijah specifically to the widow in Zarephath. Why? Why is this the first resurrection story?

It was a bold reminder that it's not about winning or losing. Elijah also had to suffer through the drought and I am guessing he got a little more edgy every day. Eating after grubby ravens. Subsisting on the same bread every day from a lowly widow. Living in the land of Baal and Asherah. I am guessing he was waiting for that day when Ahab, Jezebel and the Phoenicians were all brought low. Instead, God reminded him it wasn't about winning or losing. It wasn't about crushing the Phoenicians. It was always about redemption for whoever was interested.

One of the quickest ways to disintegrate your soul is to allow the win or lose mentality to creep into your spiritual state of affairs, to make it about us versus them. To make it a holy war against whichever group is the antagonist or terrorist du jour. When we can rationalize acts of war and brutality and hate under a Christian banner, we may be losing our soul. We may be drifting towards becoming the walking dead. I'm not talking about policy or national safety. I am talking about your soul and the way God is calling you to view the world around you.

You can lose your soul when you pursue things that don't really matter like status, power and wealth as your reason for being. But more insidiously, you can begin to lose your soul when you attach Jesus to ideologies and practices. When it comes to how we treat the world around us. Hopefully, these are questions to make you wonder, "How did we get here?" These are ideas to make you wonder about our personal and national drifts towards Gollum-like behavior. What are the precious things we protect and fight for at all costs that may be causing our souls to disintegrate?

Robert Kirkman is the author of *The Walking Dead* comics that have become the *Walking Dead* TV shows. He summed it up quite well, "In a world ruled by the dead, we are forced to finally start living." I would add it's not as easy as you think. When you are surround by



those whose lone desire in life is to consume, you can easily become infected, but there is another way. The way of grace. The way of mercy. The way of Jesus. The way of sacrifice. The way of death to self. Right after Peter calls Jesus the Christ, and Jesus affirms him, Peter then royally sticks his foot in his mouth because Jesus says that he will be crucified. Peter rebukes him. Then Jesus rebukes Peter.

Peter wants to win, and Jesus is going to show him there is more to life than winning and losing. Sometimes winning looks like losing. Sometimes losing ultimately looks like winning. Peter wanted a conquering hero and Jesus instead points him towards a submissive sacrifice.

*Mark 8:33-37*