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God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha
III. The Lord, He Is God!
I Kings 18:17-40

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We left off last week with Elijah still dwelling in the house of the widow of Zarephath – having performed a rather amazing miracle while there.¹ In the meantime, however, Elijah's nemesis, the evil King Ahab, has not been sitting idle either. As Israel suffers from the drought Elijah had declared over the whole land for the people's idolatrous worship of Baal, King Ahab has been doing his best to track Elijah down in order to have him killed.² And, if that were not enough, Queen Jezebel, who had brought the worship of the false god Baal into Israel, has been busy slaughtering all the prophets of the God of Israel left in the land. Only some one hundred prophets of God are still alive, thanks to the secret intervention of Obadiah, a servant of King Ahab – but one of the few not to have bent the knee to Baal.³ So, as our story opens this morning, Elijah is a wanted man, the worship of Baal dominates Israel, the altar of the Lord has been torn down by Jezebel, and what's left of God's prophets are in hiding. It is not looking good for Elijah and for the cause of the true God of Israel.

God thus decides that it is time to turn this situation around and quickly – a contest between Himself and the false god Baal, in order to win back the hearts of His people Israel from their idolatry. God sends Elijah to confront King Ahab again. Ahab greets Elijah with a sneer: *"Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"* And Elijah comes right back at him: *"I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals."* Pleasantries now completed, the terms of the contest are proposed and accepted. All of Israel will be gathered together at Mount Carmel. The prophets of Baal, 450 strong, will build an altar for their god, and Elijah will build an altar for the Lord. Each side will be given a bull for a sacrifice. Each will then prepare the bull and place it upon their respective altar. And then each side will call out – the prophets of Baal to Baal, the prophet Elijah to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And whichever God will send down fire first to light the altar wood and consume the sacrificial bull, that God will be declared the true God of Israel. The day comes, the people gather, the preparations are begun.

But before the contest actually happens, Elijah has something to say to the people of Israel gathered on Mount Carmel to watch this contest. Now, picture the scene. On one side is the altar to Baal, surrounded by 450 prophets of Baal. On the other side is the altar to the Lord God of Israel, surrounded by, well, just Elijah. And the people are all gathered in their thousands in the space in-between, where they can see the action at both altars. In the space in-between – which seems fitting, given what Elijah then turns and says to them: *"How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."*

Ahab and Jezebel have already thrown in their lot one hundred percent with Baal – but it seems the people of Israel are still trying to have it both ways: still worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; while, at the same time, bowing down before Baal. Trying to have it both ways. And this, says Elijah will not do and needs to stop. *“If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”*

And if you are not feeling it yet, you really should be – a little bit of spiritual discomfort, a little bit of squirming in our seats and squirming in our souls. Because this is the point where this story ceases to be solely about Israel long, long ago and starts to be a whole lot more about us right now. Trying to have it both ways. Worshipping God and yet bowing down before mammon and who knows whatever else false idols. Hoping for the world to come, and yet living entirely according to the rules and rewards of this world. Remember what Jesus said to us in His Sermon on the Mount? *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon.”*⁴ Remember what Paul said to us? *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*⁵ And now here’s Elijah singing the same song: *“How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”*

It would seem that a pretty major Biblical theme is here being expressed to us: that the people of God are ever trying to have it both ways – God and the world, God and idols, God and the status quo. While the one true God insists that we must make a choice between the two and stick with it – live out of that choice like we really mean it, really believe in the choice we have made. God has not made us to be spiritual trick riders in a cosmic rodeo, left foot on one horse, right foot on another, while we just keep going round and round in circles. *“If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”* One or the other – choose!

Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest and preacher, says that our two-trick pony idolatry problem stems from the fact that the God who made us is demanding and difficult to deal with; while the gods we make for ourselves are all about our wants, desires, and comfort. That’s why, as she puts it, *“We are always fooling around in our spiritual basements, cooking up alternative gods that promise to be more responsive to our needs.”*⁶ And then she goes on to say that if we still think we don’t have any idols, any false gods, any Baals we are bowing down to, she would be happy to suggest several Baal, golden calf, false idol detectors:

Your checkbook, for instance. What is it you invest in most heavily? What do your check stubs teach you about what you worship? Or your calendar. What gets the lion’s share of your time – which, after all, is more precious than your money? When it comes time to rest, or pray, or wait on the Lord, what gets in the way? Whatever it is, it is a golden calf for sure. A job that promises security. A house that promises comfort. A portfolio that promises protection. A relationship that promises safety. A position in the community that promises power. A car that promises prestige. All

the little golden calves lined up on our mantelpieces – none of them bad things, by the way, did you notice?

The raw material of a golden calf is almost never a bad thing. It is usually a good thing – like gold – made into an ultimate thing – like God. Only that is where the trouble starts, because things are not God. They never have been, and they never will be.⁷

“How long will you go limping between two different opinions?” Elijah asks the crowd. Elijah asks you and me. The crowd, says the Bible, answered Elijah not a word – a deafening silence. How shall we answer him?

The contest begins. The altars are ready, the bulls are prepared. Elijah lets the prophets of Baal go first. From morning until noon, the 450 prophets of Baal are crying out, “*O Baal, answer us!*” And from morning until noon, Baal says not a word. At noon, Elijah decides to give the prophets of Baal a little encouragement: “*Hey, maybe you need to yell a little louder. Maybe Baal’s off meditating somewhere or other, or maybe he’s gotten involved in another project, or maybe he’s just in the bathroom* (yes, Elijah really said that!). *Or maybe he’s just taking a long nap and needs to be woken up!*” The prophets of Baal start yelling louder, praying harder, dancing more wildly. They even start cutting themselves with swords and lances, hoping their blood will get Baal’s attention and he’ll finally come down and light a fire beneath that bull. But nothing. They get nothing from Baal.

Finally the time comes for the ordinary evening prayer and offering to the God of Israel. The prophets of Baal are worn out and bloody – still no word from Baal. Elijah says to them, and to the people of Israel, “*Okay, my turn.*” He calls the people closer in around him, having with twelve stones rebuilt the altar of the Lord which Jezebel had torn down – twelve stones, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel whom God had delivered out of slavery in Egypt and brought into this Promised Land – just a little visual reminder to them about who they really are and Whose they really are. As they watch, he digs a deep trench around the altar, puts the bull in its place. And then he tells the people to go fill four large jars with water up to the brim, and then to come pour them over the bull, over the wood for the fire, and over the altar itself. They go and do as he asks. “*Do it a second time,*” he says to them. They fill the jars and pour them out on the altar a second time. “*Do it a third time,*” he says – and they do. The bull is now soaked, the wood for the fire is sodden, the altar is dripping, and the trench below looks like a castle moat. If ever there was an offering that was not going to catch fire, it’s this one.

Elijah comes near to the altar, standing in the mud beside it, and then says this prayer – no dancing about, no screaming, no cutting himself with swords and lances. Just this one single, simple prayer:

O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.

And suddenly, from heaven, the fire of the Lord comes rushing down. The bull is consumed, the wood for the fire is consumed – even the water in the trench below the altar is turned instantly to steam. The people fall to their knees in awe and in absolute terror. And they begin crying out, crying out, “*The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!*” The prophets of Baal are put to flight and put to the sword. The victory of Elijah over the prophets of Baal – the victory of the Lord God over the false god Baal – is now complete.

But remember Elijah’s prayer – what he prayed for right at the end: “. . . *that you have turned their hearts back.*” The biggest victory on that day, the one which matters most to the Lord God is not the victory over Baal or the victory over the prophets of Baal – that was never really much of a competition to begin with. The real victory is the victory Elijah prayed for, and which is now heard in the cry of the people of Israel: “*The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!*” The only victory that truly mattered to the Lord our God on that day – and on any and every day before or since – is this: the turning of our hearts towards Him. The turning of our hearts solely and completely to Him. “*The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is our God!*”

That’s what this contest was really all about. Indeed, that is what the whole of the Biblical story is all about. That’s what the whole, real-live story of life in this world which God has made is really all about – the winning back of our hearts to His. We turned our backs on Him in the Garden – and, ever since, all God has done has been for this single purpose: to win our hearts back to Him. The fire of the Lord coming down from heaven. Fire, the Biblical symbol of judgement against our sin – God trying to win us back. Fire, the Biblical symbol of the purification of those sins – God trying to win us back. Fire, the Biblical symbol of the love of God for us – a love which will not rest until He has brought us all back to Himself, back within the full embrace of His love.

One of the older commentaries I was reading put it this way: “*According to the record, the miracle of fire consuming the sacrifice on Carmel converted the early Israelites. The greater miracle is that the sacrifice on Calvary started a fire in the hearts of men which the centuries cannot put out.*”⁸ And that, finally, is what this story is really all about – then and now. That even though we, like Israel, keep on limping along between two opinions, stuck in a borderland of our own sin and weakness and compromise – still, the fire of God’s love for us will never go out. But will keep trying to kindle a fire of answering love within us, until at last we are fully, and truly, His – once again and forevermore.

In fact, in John’s Revelation, that glorious vision of the End, there is a passage in which John describes Jesus, now crowned Lord of All, as having eyes “*like a flame of fire.*”⁹ I find that a most hopeful and helpful image – not frightening, but reassuring. In His eyes, the fire of His judgment upon us, by which He enables us to understand that we are in fact lost – and therefore inspiring us to begin seeking Him, in order that we may be found. In His eyes, the fire of His purifying grace – that same grace by which, upon His cross, He consumed our sin and guilt, that we might come to possess instead His righteousness, His right-relatedness to God and to others, as well as the fire of His Holy Spirit dwelling within in us. And, in His eyes, the fire of His love for us – expressed both as judgment and as mercy. The fire of His love for us, which will never burn out. Until, at last, we too burn with a love pure enough and strong enough to say – with all our heart and soul and mind and strength – “*The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is my God, our God, now and forevermore!*”

¹ I Kings 17:17-24.

² I Kings 18:7-10.

³ I Kings 18:3-4.

⁴ Matthew 6:24.

⁵ Romans 12:1-2.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Choose This Day," in Gospel Medicine (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 126.

⁷ Taylor, pp. 126-127.

⁸ Ralph W. Sockman, The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), pp. 159-160.

⁹ Revelation 2:18.