

6-28-2020 SERMON CCI I Kings 18 Elijah vs the Prophets of Baal

We're in week 3 of our sermon series on the life of the prophet Elijah and all I can say about today's scripture reading is "Wow!" If we were to make a movie of this story it would be filled with meaty conversations, humorous snide comments, dramatic special effects, and a real moral to take home with us. We learned 2 weeks ago that King Ahab was one of Israel's worst kings. He had married Jezebel, a Gentile, who had brought with her the god of Baal.

Baal was an attractive god to worship. Baal was believed to bring the seasons, fertility, and to control the rains. If Baal was unhappy, the babies and the rain stopped; if Baal was happy, the babies and the rains came. The old proverb about mothers could be said about Baal, "If Baal ain't happy, ain't nobody happy. So people would do anything to make Baal happy, even offering their firstborn children as sacrifices to Baal.

King Ahab had encouraged God's people to worship Baal too. And because they did, a drought had come. That physical drought reflected the drought of faith God saw in his people. They had begun to doubt God's power and looked to Baal for back-up. People were suffering as the drought continued. Last Sunday we heard how Elijah helped a starving Gentile widow and her son in Sidon have enough food to survive the drought. We learned how there are no boundaries to God's power or God's love.

In today's story, the drought had lasted over 3 years. Everyone prayed for rain. Which God would answer- Baal or the Lord? It was time for God's people to make up their minds who they trusted. Elijah asked them, "*How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow **him**.*" The word translated waver speaks of a person limping. I understand limping. I've had to wear an orthopedic boot with a 2-inch heel for two different foot problems. The boot was taller than my tallest shoes, so it was like having one leg 2 inches longer than the other. As I walked, I would put my weight on my left foot in the boot and then on my right foot. Taller-shorter-taller-shorter. I got around, but limping tended to throw my hips off-kilter. That's what was happening with God's people's faith. They trusted the LORD first, but then again, they trusted Baal too, and it threw their faith off-kilter because they never trusted either completely. It was time for them to choose between the LORD and Baal.

What a contest Elijah proposed- 450 prophets of Baal plus 400 prophets of Asherah against one prophet of the Lord. Both Elijah and the prophets of Baal would prepare a sacrifice of a bull. Both sides would prepare their own sacrifice. They could do whatever they wanted to get the attention of their god, but they couldn't cheat by starting the fire themselves. The god who answered by fire would win- that God would be the true God.

The prophets of Baal went first. Imagine all those prophets dancing and jumping, shouting and praying, "Answer us, Baal! Bring the rain!" Silence. Then came Elijah's taunts - "Perhaps you should shout louder, maybe Baal is asleep!" "Maybe he's traveling or just too busy." So they shouted louder and began to cut themselves to get Baal's attention. Vs 29 is very poignant: "But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention."

Then it was Elijah's turn. He gathered 12 large stones, one for each tribe of Israel. And he had a trench dug around the altar. Then on went firewood and the bull for the sacrifice. And to make the contest more interesting, Elijah ordered 12 large jars of water to be poured over everything, until it drenched the altar, the bull, the wood and filled the trench. A jar of water for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. Did the people gasp? "How can he waste all that precious water in a drought?" Elijah's God's reputation was on the line; Elijah's reputation was on the line.

At the time appointed for the evening sacrifice, Elijah stepped forward and prayed a simple prayer. "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, answer me so that everyone will know that only you, O Lord, are God, and you are turning their hearts back to you." No fancy footwork, shouting, or bloodletting, just a simple prayer and total confidence in God's power. And the fire of the LORD fell in a dramatic demonstration of who was truly God. "The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!"

The odds of winning: Baal 450 to 1 If they had had bookies back then, people should have bet their money on Baal.

The final score: Baal -0 The LORD- everything

As the drought of faith ended, so did the drought, and the long-awaited rain began to fall from the skies.

Two things stand out to me in this story:

First, it doesn't take an army of people to take a stand or make a difference for God. One person doing what the LORD leads and having confidence in the LORD's power can overcome tremendous odds. Sometimes we ask "But what can one person do?" And we don't try. But let's think about what 1 person can do. *One tired woman* named Rosa Parks refused to go sit in the back of the bus where it was believed black people belonged, and she sparked a protest that led to new freedom for black Americans. *One man*, Woody, has tirelessly supported Tent City 4 and even hires some of the residents to help him with work around their property. *One man* with the love of God making a difference for homeless people. *Two women*, Janine and Charlotte, brought us a family last December to shower with Christmas gifts so we could make a difference as a church in the name of Jesus. I could name many more differences made by people in the church and others.

Elijah stood against the prophets of Baal and the people turned back to God. One person against the crowd. A church bulletin I once read said, *One person of faith plus God is always a majority*. There are plenty of majorities listening to this message in different places. Each of you is only one person, but you are one. And by faith, one plus God is a majority. Whether you're 15 or 55 or 95 there's a place for you in what God is doing on earth. It only takes one to write a card or talk with someone who's lonely, to pray with someone who's discouraged, to help someone get what they need, to speak up, or to lead a needed change. What is God waiting for you to believe he can accomplish through you?

Second, let's listen again to the question Elijah asked: "How long will you waver {or limp} between two opinions?" They weren't the only people who waver between choices. "This option looks right, the cost is right, the size and color are good, okay, let's get this one." "Yeah... but this one has benefits too. What should I do?" Sound familiar? Wavering faith is filled with "yeah, buts." "Yeah, I believe God answers prayer, but I can't help but worry...." "Yeah, I believe God is powerful, but maybe...?" "Yeah, I can see this is the right decision for the church, but what about...?"

This story was written down for people who would soon be captives in another country filled with other gods and would face the question of who they were going to follow. Would they remain true to the LORD or waver in

their faith? Unfortunately, history tells us they wavered. It's one thing to say we believe in God; it's another to risk placing everything in God's hands. And last Sunday we learned that real faith has no guarantees. Even after a decision is made in faith, we can waver about whether we did the right thing. Another idea starts calling to us, "Come look at me, have I got a deal for you!" It's like buyer's remorse. Wavering can lead churches and people to keep putting off important decisions until it's too late. "Yeah, buts" make it impossible to faithfully decide or follow.

There's a story of three frogs sitting on a log on a pond. Two frogs decide to jump off the log. How many frogs are left sitting on the log? Three. I can hear you say, "What?" Just because they decide with their heads to jump doesn't mean they actually jumped. Following means actually jumping. Who or what are we going to follow? Elijah said, "Stop wavering, make up your mind, and follow." Jesus said the same thing. "Whoever would be my disciple must take up their cross daily and follow me." No more yeah, buts. Just choose by faith and follow. Every decision, every day, every step of the way."