

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, November 5, 2023

The Narrative Lectionary situates us once again this morning in First Kings. We're going to read together First Kings 18: 20-39. You can either follow along in your Bible, if you brought it with you, or one of the blue pew Bibles as we listen once again to God's story from First Kings. Before we read together, let us go to God In prayer.

Good and gracious Spirit, move amongst us this morning. Fall fresh and quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in our hearing we might be led to lead lives of response. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning in the 20th verse of the 18th chapter of First Kings—

So Ahab sent to all the Israelites and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel.

Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The people did not answer him a word.

Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty.

Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it.

Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." All the people answered, "Well spoken!"

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it."

So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made.

At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."

Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them.

As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me"; and all the people came closer to him.

First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down;

Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name."

With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed.

Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood."

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Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time, so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding.

Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back."

Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever.
Amen

Growing up in Greenville almost everybody I knew took the bus to school. So we would gather every morning earlier than I thought reasonable at the corner of Firethorn and Crosswinds. We would have a nice little small group gathering there. It was always an interesting time. I learned many, many things waiting for that bus. I remember it was a...a cold morning sometime in the winter, not unlike some of the mornings we experienced last week. I got into a little spat with one of my good friends, Steve. And Steve in the midst of his angst and his anger at me, he decided to deliver a line that perhaps all young children have had to hear at one time or another. Perhaps it's the argument that many children have. He said very clearly in front of everyone—we were talking about who was stronger. He said, "My dad is stronger than your dad," and he let it linger, and I was offended. I did not defend Dick Powers very well, I must say. I couldn't figure out in the moment how I could assure the gathered crowd how my dad was most indeed stronger than Steve's dad. I think my weak argument was that our last name somehow endowed him with particular strength. It's this weird back and forth that couldn't truly be proved unless all the dads on Firethorn and Crosswinds got together for a strength contest.

I thought about that this week as I was reading this text again in the midst of the coolness of autumn falling upon our city. In the midst of First Kings there are many transitions in power that we will read about, but there's also a different type of struggle for power that is happening. This morning we get to see that plainly in First Kings 18. Who is the true God, the one that truly holds power in the people's lives and in the world? "So Ahab sent to all the Israelites and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel," the text begins. All the people—they gather together. They gather together, and Elijah steps before them and asks them what is for us a...a piercing question. If we hear it not just as a question asked of the people a couple thousand years ago but perhaps asked of us this very morning, it might convict us. He says to the gathered people, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" And he lets it hang in the air. How long are you going to divide your energy between the God that you know to be the Lord and the god that has been brought to you, Baal? If the Lord is God follow him, but if Baal

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then follow him. I let that question sit with me this week as a convicting one, imagining how many times I allow my energy to be divided.

There are many places where we might be people of two different opinions or two different energies. We might know in our hearts that God is of importance to us and in our lives, but—there's got to be a but. God is important to me, my faith is important to me, but I needed some rest this morning. Could be true that you do. All of us got an extra hour this morning, actually. Yeah, Betsy's happy about that, yeah. But maybe over the last couple of years since we had this wonderful gift of virtual worship, maybe there's been a Sunday morning when you got up and it was a little colder than you wanted, and you said, “You know what, I had planned on going to church, but gosh this bed is comfortable and warm, and the coffee is super tasty here, but I've got to wait till after worship to have it. Maybe I'll just stay home today.” Or as you are raising children if you are a parent, “God I believe to be important to me and to my children, but there are so many other things that are asking for their time. Whether it be sports or other extracurriculars, there are so many things vying for just the few hours that are free in their schedules.” Or if you are a student, “I know that my faith is important to me, but I can skip out on youth group. I've got to finish this homework assignment.” Not that homework isn't important, but it is to say that more often than not, we have the opportunity to be people with two different opinions. God is important. Our faith is important, but as followers of Christ how often do we divide our energy, our time amongst the lesser Idols of the world? Now I'm not one who would say that all things within the walls of this place are good, and all the things outside this place are bad. I believe that God's goodness is found in all places within our world, right? But I do think there's a lesson here that we get from Elijah. There are 450 voices calling to the people to worship Baal, 450 voices saying to them, “This is... this is the source that will give you life. This is the one that will heal you, the one that will transform you, the one that will sustain you.” 450 voices to Elijah's one voice. All that are left, the voices that would call us to worship lesser Idols, are many, which makes it very difficult for each of us to set expectations that are different from the dominant norm. It is hard if you have a family to say, “We've set different priorities for our family. We actually think that having...being at church and having our kids there is really important, so we're going to have to balance this out. We're going to make sure we're doing all these other things, but we're going to make sure that we have time here too. This community, this body is critically important.” It's hard to say to a friend, “I'm going home early on Saturday night. I've got something tomorrow I need to be at. I've decided to focus my energy differently.”

Elijah—he actually doesn't come off very well about halfway through this text, right? He lets all the followers of Baal surround and encircle the altar that they've made, march around, kind of heckles them. I don't really like him at this moment, right? “Cry louder when the fire doesn't come. Your god's certainly a god. Maybe he's asleep, uh, maybe he's left the building. You need to call him back. Maybe he is meditating.” Elijah calls to them, heckles them, and yet nothing happens. And then when we just begin to believe that maybe this is less about God and more about Elijah's ego, we get to verse 30; and then Elijah said to all the people, “Come closer to me.” And all the people came closer. There's a tenderness in this turn in Elijah. “Come closer to

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me,” he says. And then you can just see them as he begins to reconstruct the altar, grabbing one stone and then two and then 12, clearing an area on the ground, and then building them up, placing the wood just perfectly. The animal has been prepared, and he...he lays the sacrifice there, digs a trench, and then he invites them. He says, “You know what? Actually, get some water. I want you to make sure that you know how difficult this is going to be for the true Lord. Drench this thing, drench it once, drench it twice, drench it a third time. Do that. Do you see? Are y'all paying attention to what this looks like?” Elijah draws the people in more closely, sets it all out before them, because Elijah knows that there is a fuller life to be lived that he wants the people to know about.

Elijah knows that the people...that there's a way of living, a way of ordering your life that is going to keep you limping. It is going to stop you from being your fullest, truest self. Your gait is going to not quite be perfect because this way of living can't actually provide the nourishment and the care that you and your spirit and your soul need. There will be a time when you are in trouble, and you will ask for help from this different way of living, and there will be no voice, and there will be no answer, and there will be no response. And so Elijah draws them in closely, and he puts everything together. He knows that there is a way of discipleship that will feel like it's overly constructed, and it's burdensome in some way. It might feel that way, but what it's going to do is it's going to change your life. In reality it is going to free you and open you to a way of living that isn't restrictive at all but is actually free. And then as they are gathered in, leaning in, he prays a prayer to the Lord. “Oh, Lord God of Abraham and Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, oh Lord, so that this people may know you, oh Lord, that they might know that you are God, that you have turned their hearts back to you.” This is not about ego for Elijah. This is about care for the people, a deep desire to win the souls and spirits of the people who are being told that there is a way that might nourish them, and he knows it won't.

And what happens? God shows up, fire descends upon this altar, the stones get burned up, the dust gets burned up. The author of First Kings says that the water is licked up, it is taken from the trenches. All of a sudden God shows up in these people's lives in a way that is powerful. God shows up in power and in presence, and the people are reminded whose they are.

So, here's the thing, beloved. I am not quite sure what is competing for your energy and your attention this morning, but I hope and pray that you might hear the voice of God through the Prophet Elijah. “Come closer to me; come closer to me.” Come back to yourself; come back to this source of life and goodness and sustenance. Come back into this place of love and welcome. There is power and presence here. There is refuge and renewal in the true God that we know. I pray that you might hear this week the voice of God calling you to draw closer. There are many voices that would claim that there is power outside of this God. If it is just one voice that calls us back, may it be the voice of the Prophet Elijah. May it be the voice of God, calling us tenderly this morning to draw close that we...we might know God's power and presence in our lives, that we might be transformed, that we might, like the people of Israel so long ago, proclaim that the

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Lord indeed is God. The Lord indeed is God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebecca, the God of Jacob and Leah, the God of you and me.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.