

Old Testament Lesson—1 Kings 18:20-40

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set 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—he is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good." Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!" Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

New Testament Lesson—Romans 11:1-5

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

"Lead us not into temptation," says the Lord's Prayer.
I have to confess that I was tempted this week—big time. And I was this close to giving in.

But, instead, I've decided to take a leap of faith. We'll see what happens and if it pays off. This is one of those stories of Scripture that's equally fun and problematic to tackle. It's pretty risky, don't you think?

I'll be honest with you. I was tempted to sanitize the story quite a bit—to water it down—make it more palatable. I thought, man this would be a lot easier if I just left off the ending. So, so tempting...

You know, if I just stopped short of all the gratuitous violence, this could be an amazing passage about God's faithfulness and power lifting us up even when the odds of you getting out alive are about four hundred fifty to one.

As close as I came to making this an easier sermon to preach, I was able to resist that temptation—just barely—this time.

Because it doesn't do anyone any good to hide from the truth—especially when the truth comes from Scripture—from Elijah, one of God's most courageous servants. It's not healthy.

In fact, I'd be doing y'all a severe disservice to pretend like something that's difficult isn't really there. Truth is that we're called to wrestle with the Bible. We're meant to be challenged by it. We're supposed to sit in the discomfort sometimes.

That's just part of discipleship. Following Christ demands we do this. And so we'll do just that today.

I believe it's week four of our focus on the miracles of the Bible. Last Sunday, Elijah raised the dead—the non-Jewish son of a Gentile widow, to be specific.

This morning, our lesson from Scripture shows the great prophet doing something exceptionally spectacular. It's easily one of the most phenomenal scenes the Bible gives us—one where our imaginations can run wild with awe and wonder.

And, it's an inflection point in Elijah's life—a moment where things have come to a head. Something's got to give. God's people can't continue to split their devotion. Elijah's had enough of his people wavering back and forth between worshipping the LORD and worshipping the god of the Canaanites. He's done—just done. It's got to stop and it's got to stop now.

It's time for a grand gesture! Perhaps that will show the people, once and for all, what worshipping a false god looks like in the real world.

Spoiler alert: It's gonna look like a big, fat nothing-burger; and it's gonna sound like empty, embarrassing silence.

So the prophet arranges a public demonstration of sorts—one he knows will stun the prophets of Baal and, more importantly, will set God's people straight. Yeah, they're gonna know who's who—gonna know who shows up for them when it really counts.

And let's be real: Elijah's got some moxie. Right? There's some deep-rooted swagger going on—a confidence that no else really comes close to in either testament.

Can you picture it? A huge throng of God's people—gathered for the contest of the ages—except most of the Israelites aren't particularly invested in either team! They just want to see who wins—playing both sides in a way...

But that doesn't shake Elijah. He stays the course.

What's more: He's the only prophet there wearing the LORD's jersey. Every other "prophet" on Mount Carmel that day—all four hundred fifty of them—was rooting for team Baal! I mean, that's not just lopsided. That's woefully depressing—overwhelming—terrifying.

Can you imagine? Four hundred fifty sets of eyes that can't wait to see you fail—that can't stand you—eyes just craving your humiliation—desperate for you to choke under the pressure.

But, even that doesn't shake Elijah. Dude is here for it!

It's all the more amazing when we zoom out and consider the larger context. The reason poor Elijah's all alone? Wanna know why the count is four hundred fifty to one? Why do the odds seem so stacked against our guy?

It's because God's prophets were being systematically hunted down. A certain ruler was determined to snuff the life out of every one of them. Maybe you've heard of her—the infamous Queen Jezebel.

In fact, the danger was so intense that most of “team Israel” was in hiding. If you were a prophet of the LORD at the time—one of Elijah's peers—you were most likely stowed away in a cave somewhere—literally. Anything to escape the clutches of Jezebel...

God bless him—Elijah's running for his life half the time or more it seems...

But despite all that—despite all that might go wrong—despite all the danger and the walls closing in—none of it shakes him—none of it breaks Elijah's spirit.

My goodness: If you could only bottle that kind of confidence. The righteous audacity of it all!

Here's the idea: Essentially, there's gonna be two altars—two sets of sacrificial animals—one for the LORD and one for Baal (the god of the Canaanites). When the time comes, your prophet calls upon your god to burn your offering to a crisp. When fire rains down from the heavens, you will know which prophets are true. You will know which god is God.

Baal's team goes first. They call upon their god for hours on end—begging for Baal to show up. They're getting desperate. Crickets. Painful silence.

That's when Elijah's confidence turns into something else. Doesn't it? Freshly vindicated and ready for the real show, the prophet starts talking some trash. I might even call it cruel if we didn't know about the horrors inflicted on other prophets of the LORD.

Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”

I know right? Yikes. Well, that's when Elijah's confidence reaches its greatest height. He decides to move the goalpost—decides to make it more difficult for his own turn—decides to cover his offering with buckets of water—even digging a kind of moat around the altar!

Remember, fire's got to come and burn up the whole thing to ash. Lots of water (in theory at least) is gonna make that a bit harder. But, after this, there will be no doubt left in anyone's mind that Israel's god is the true God Almighty.

As Elijah calls upon the LORD, something like a mini supernova descends upon his sacrifice. This isn't just a ball of fire. It's far more potent. It's like lightning in the form of flames that crushes his altar and licks up every molecule of water until it's as dry as Moses' path through the Red Sea.

With Baal's prophets understandably devastated, the gathered crowd falls on their faces in praise of the LORD. Incontrovertible evidence. Indisputable proof: The LORD is God and none other.

It's done—over. They've won (as we knew they would). Then comes the part I was tempted to just leave out—the very end of the story...

Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

Eesh...Ugh, did you have to take it that far? Why? You won! Baal's prophets were humiliated and the people had turned back to the LORD (at least for now). Why not just leave it

at that? And by the way...notice it's the *people* that do the dirty work—freshly incensed zealots that they are...But still...Why?

I wish I could tell you, my friends. I wish I had a good answer—something satisfying that would clean it all up. But I don't.

We know about the ways of ancient tribal warfare in that region. We know about the Law of Talion—an “eye for an eye”—we do to you what you did to us—no more, no less. And we know we're not supposed to impose our modern value systems on ancient peoples.

But that's it, y'all. Anything else is just trying to pretend the hard stuff ain't there.

We do know, however, how the Apostle Paul sees this story. Writing to the Romans, Paul takes this part of Elijah's story to mean something like this...

Here's the truth: There will always be those who seek to discredit the ways of God and God's prophets—who look at God's servants and only see a threat to their power, prestige, and privilege. Equally true, though, is that there will always be a beloved and protected people for God to bless and uphold with God's victorious, omnipotent right hand. And that's good news, siblings in Christ.

No matter how bad things get; no matter how violent the world becomes—how unjust society turns—a remnant shall remain—a light that no darkness can snuff out. There will always be a reason for hope—for believing that goodness is stronger than evil.

That's the truth both Elijah and Paul would hope catches fire.

May we find rest and comfort in that truth.

Amen.