

Mount Carmel

In the name of the only true God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, dear friends,

In our first lesson from 1 Kings chapter 18 we heard the account of Elijah versus the false prophets, of God versus the false god Baal. I'm going to ask you to revisit how you felt as you heard those words—whether they were familiar to you or this is the first time you recall hearing them. How did you feel? What did you think about what you heard? How about this: Whose side were you on as you heard that bit of history read?

I'm betting you would say, *"Elijah's! God's! I'm a Christian, so I'm on their side!"* In our minds, we probably cheered on the Lord's prophet—and maybe laughed inside as he taunted the people and the false prophets. Likely we thought it was pretty awesome that God came down with fire from heaven with proof of his mighty power. And if we happen to know what took place after our text, we're even okay with the slaughter of the prophets of Baal that followed. After all, they got what they had coming because it's a pretty awful thing to lead people away from God and toward an eternity of suffering in hell.

But I have a "what if" for you this morning. "What if" we're a bit more like the people
who were waiting expectantly for Baal to respond,
who shouted themselves hoarse, who danced around that idol altar,
who slashed their own skin and spilled their own blood in order to get the
attention that they so desperately wanted from their god?

What if we're more like *them* than Elijah?

"Well, that's ridiculous!" you say. And I say, *"Maybe not."* Given the Mountaintop Experience God puts before us today, I think we have to consider it.

So let's look more closely at the events that brought all the people to Mount Carmel and what happened up there—a little Bible history—and then consider what that has to do with us and our relationship with God.

You know what it's like to walk in on the middle of a conversation and it's something that sounds pretty interesting, but it's not entirely clear—and you have to have someone backup a bit at tell you the beginning? That's the feeling I had when I began studying our text. I had forgotten *all* the details of the beginning of the account and realized that maybe you'd like a refresher so that this will make more sense too.

So, quickly, here's a rundown on the people and the places we immediately encounter and a bit of what had happened prior to our story.

Obadiah was in charge of the king of Israel's palace. In spite of an incredibly wicked king and queen, he was a faithful servant of God. He even saved the lives of 100 faithful prophets of God by hiding them away from Queen Jezebel, who wanted to kill them.

Ahab was the king of the northern kingdom of Israel. He took Jezebel from Sidon as his queen. She brought in the worship of false gods and was violently opposed to the true God. As for King Ahab, listen to this tragic description of him from 1 Kings 16:

Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him (1 Kings 16:30-33).

Women involved in our Thursday morning Bible Study on Biblical Archaeology may recall that the Baal, the idol, from Sidon was Melqart, to whom they even made human sacrifices, including children. His picture was later included on the coins from that area—coins used for the temple tax in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. So...not a good woman to marry and certainly not good for the spiritual welfare of the kingdom of God's people.

As you might imagine, there was tremendous conflict between the great prophet of the LORD, Elijah, and the wicked king and queen! Elijah found Obadiah, the palace manager, and convinced him to tell King Ahab to come and meet him. This was risky because Ahab had been searching high and low for Elijah for over three years—ever since the drought began that Elijah had prophesied because of Ahab's rebellion against God. The drought was severe, which is why, in our text, Ahab calls Elijah the **"troubler of Israel."**

Ahab, of course, took no responsibility for being the cause of God's judgment, but blamed it on Elijah, the messenger from God. Elijah reminded Ahab that his rejection of the LORD and his embracing the worship of false gods made *him* the one who had brought trouble to Israel! He then tells the king to bring the people and all the false prophets to Mount Carmel. If you know a little Biblical geography, picture a range of mountains that is directly to the west of the Sea of Galilee. It begins at the Mediterranean Sea and runs 24 miles inland to the southeast—that's Mount Carmel. Somewhere on that range, most likely close to the Mediterranean Sea, is where this Mountaintop Experience took place.

As God's preacher, Elijah called the people to account for their sin against God. **"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."** And this simple description of where the people were at is a scathing indictment on their spiritual condition: **But the people said nothing.**

Elijah then established the ground rules for a battle of the gods, something to possibly affect their sin-saturated hearts and bring them back to God.

You heard how Elijah gave the prophets of Baal every seeming advantage. Between the two bulls for the sacrifice, they got to choose and he would take the other. Then he told *them* to go first. So they began shouting prayers to Baal. And it went on all morning with God's prophet watching on. Now, one of my Seminary professors once told us, *"Sarcasm has no place in your ministry."* Apparently Elijah never got that memo! At midday he began sarcastically taunting them. **"Shout louder!" "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy** (The Hebrew word suggests that Elijah is saying that maybe Baal was going to the bathroom!), **or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened."** You see, there was an annual "awakening celebration" for this god, so perhaps Elijah is making a clever dig at their false god and the foolishness of worshiping a worthless idol.

And for all the shouting and slashing themselves until they bled and for all the hours they kept it up, nothing happened. **There was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.** Though this surprised the prophets of Baal, it was no surprise to Elijah because he knew that idols are nothing and that there is only one God. Time and effort so focused on something that has been put in the place God should occupy is a waste and angers the holy God.

Elijah called for everyone's attention. He wanted them all to witness him fixing the LORD's altar, which the people had abandoned. He prepared the sacrifice to God, soaked everything down with water three times and then he prayed: **"O LORD, 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, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."**

And there on Mount Carmel, the LORD left no doubt the he is the almighty God: **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.**

If you're like me, you were thinking something like this: *"Yes! That's the way to show them! How could you ever forget a God who has the power to do things like that? Why would you ever chase after some false god when you already know the LORD? That makes no sense at all. They got what they had coming to them."*

As we hear about these people who had abandoned and ignored God, doesn't it also come to your mind that we have been guilty of similar sins? No, not many of us have prayed to, bowed down to, abused our bodies for, an idol like Baal. But if you consider that an idol is really anything at all that we give the highest priority in our lives, haven't we also been guilty? If an idol is something that consumes our thinking, or something we dedicate an overwhelming amount of our time to and our money to, then haven't we been guilty? Are we sitting here right now guilty of not recognizing that the LORD is the most important thing in our lives?

If we're absent from worship as much as we're here, we need to consider this. If we're eager to save and spend for vacations and retirement and hobbies, but we give offerings to the LORD only occasionally or that are not as God wishes them to be: generous and joyful and *in proportion* to the wealth he has handed to us, we have to think about whether we're guilty of worshiping ourselves and other things at the expense of the LORD. Have we even sacrificed our children to our false gods of family time, sports and clubs, allowing children to decide things that are the parents' God-given responsibility?

Like the people of God's nation under King Ahab, we gladly accept the title of "God's people" or "Christian," but we might be firmly entrenched in worship of ourselves, of recreation, of personal interests. As I indicated, it's pretty easy to evaluate—look at where your money, time and attention go. Consider how much effort you put into prayer, Bible reading, worship, or helping in some way to participate in the growth of God's kingdom, as he calls us to do. I'm afraid that we have set up false gods whom we worship at the expense of LORD. We have sometimes acted more like those faithless people than faithful Elijah.

Today is a mountaintop showdown for you and me too! Trust me, I have been evaluating my attitude and actions all week as I've worked on this text. I fear I've liked this bit of Bible history for some wrong reasons in the past!

So what will our response be today as we're hit with the damning law of God and his all-consuming power like those people of Israel were? For the sake of our souls, I pray that our response is like theirs. Apparently this mountaintop experience was sufficient to get the attention of the people and jog their memories about the expectation of God that we worship him alone: **When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!"**

You realize that's what God wanted, right? His desire was not to consume them all with fire from heaven or to have them eternally suffer in the fire of hell. Elijah prayed that God would show himself as he had in the past—why? **So these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.**

God showed himself to be the only true God on that mountaintop and the people were reminded that he was the God who had saved them and blessed them and their people throughout history. Because God is full of grace—undeserved love—he does not want to consume *us* with fire or have *us* suffer the eternal fires of hell either. So he has taken us up the mountain with Elijah to make us think about where our faith has really been placed and to give us the opportunity to remember that he has always blessed us too.

We can actually consider—not the sacrifice of a bull on an altar of stones—but the sacrifice of God's one and only Son, Jesus, on the cross. That was not a demonstration of the holy God's *power*, but a demonstration of his *love* for you and me. All the evidences and manifestations of our idol worship were placed on Jesus. All of the guilt that should haunt us and earn us eternal death was on his shoulders. And when he died there, forgiveness for all those sins became ours. By faith in him, those sins are gone. We have nothing to fear from a God who can burn up stones and soil with fire if he wants to.

I would like to think that those who witnessed the power of God on that mountain—and his loving grace that gave them an opportunity to return to faith in him—meant what they said and stopped worshiping that idol. And I pray that I, along with you, will descend Mount Carmel thankful for God's love and with a renewed desire to change our lives from emphasizing and prioritizing worldly things over the God who loves us and has saved us. May the Holy Spirit make it so. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.