

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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FEBRUARY 3, 2008



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1 Kings 16-18

"Wavering?"

Today we meet the two giant figures in the saga of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah: king Ahab and the prophet Elijah. The date is somewhere between 875 and 850 BC. The kingdoms have been divided 75 years or so; the northern kingdom of Israel has already seen six kings, and is about to experience the worst of them all; to counter him, the LORD raises up the man who will be called the greatest of the prophets.

1) *Ahab and Jezebel*

Ahab the king is the son of the army commander Omri who had been made king by popular acclaim; Omri reigned 12 years, of which we are told only that he built a new capital city for himself named Samaria; and that "he did evil in the eyes of the LORD and sinned more than all those before him." Ahab "thought the sins of the past trivial." To prove it, he married the infamous Jezebel, daughter of the king of the Phoenicians. For her, he built a temple in Samaria for the Phoenician god Baal, and Ahab "served and worshipped Baal." He also added numerous "Asherah poles" for devotion to the little-known goddess Ashera, who is always associated with trees or poles, and presumably was a fertility goddess.

Jezebel the queen not only promotes idolatry in Israel, she seeks the destruction of the worship of YHWH, the LORD, the God of Israel. By now there are "schools of

prophets" in Israel, and Jezebel sets out to kill them all. Only the work of a court steward called Obadiah, who still follows the LORD, allows 100 of his prophets to escape when Obadiah hides them in caves and supplies them with food and water. In their place, hundreds of prophets of Baal and of Ashera appear in Israel; they, we are told, "eat at Jezebel's table." Ahab and Jezebel's goal is to wipe out the worship of YHWH. Israel's leaders are now not only idolaters but active persecutors.

Baal was the Phoenician god of storm, rain, and weather, and therefore indirectly of the fertility of the land. So it is at this very point that Elijah prays the LORD will confront Baal - the prophet asks that there will be a drought. The LORD sends one that lasts 3 years.

2) *Elijah the Prophet*

Who is this man that God listens to? He is from east of Jordan, from Gilead, in the region belonging to the tribe of Manasseh. We know nothing more about his origins; what we do know is that the LORD answers his prayers, guards him and provides for him.

Elijah is sent to Samaria to proclaim to Ahab: "the LORD, the God of Israel, whom I serve, will send neither dew nor rain except at my word." As the drought and famine develop,

the LORD sends Elijah to live in a ravine east of Jordan by a stream named Cherith. There Elijah lives for some time with water from the stream and food, bread and meat, brought to him twice daily by ravens. The LORD provides.

When Cherith eventually dries up, the LORD sends Elijah 70 miles northwest to a village named Zarephath on the coast of Phoenicia. "I have commanded a widow there to provide you with food," says the LORD - who intends to bless the widow as well as Elijah by this. Elijah asks bread and water from the widow, who replies that she has so little flour and oil left that she and her son will soon starve. Nevertheless she provides for the prophet, and in response he tells her that the LORD his God will ensure that her flour and oil will not run out until the drought ends. He stays with her for perhaps two years. But when her son falls ill and dies, she fears that this is "the work of his God," so Elijah cries out "O LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him," and "the LORD hears Elijah's cry." "Now I know," says the astonished widow, "that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

With this Phoenician widow's testimony, the "man of God" is sent again to confront Ahab in Samaria and proclaim that "the word of the LORD is that he is now going to send rain." It has not rained in Israel in over three years. Ahab remembers Elijah - he has not forgotten the prophecy of drought - and greets him as "you troubler of Israel." That is not me, that is *you*," replies Elijah. "You and your family have abandoned the LORD's commands and followed Baal's."

So Elijah challenges Ahab to a "contest of the gods." They will meet on Mt. Carmel, and see who is truly God. Ahab assembles 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Ashera. Elijah proclaims that "he is *the only prophet* of

the LORD left in Israel" - our first insight into the inner life of a man who for all his greatness, has some very human flaws! But here is the contest: one prophet of YHWH, and 850 prophets, a king, presumably many other supporters and protectors, many, many onlookers, and the supposed presence of the great god Baal.

3) *The Competition*

What is the point of the contest? Elijah's words present as pointed a challenge as any in Israel's history. "*How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him!*" The people say nothing. Elijah is putting his own life on the line here. His own name means "*YHWH is God*" - *eli'jah*; will the LORD now honor his only prophet, or will Elijah be slaughtered by Jezebel's soldiers as so many of the LORD's prophets have been already?

You know, I am sure, the scene on Mt. Carmel. Two stone altars are built - in Elijah's case, he restores an ancient altar to the LORD - wood is piled on them, and animals sacrificed. You go first, says Elijah - call on Baal and see if he will send down fire to consume your sacrifice! If so, Baal is God! Or maybe YHWH will send fire? Let us see who truly is God! Baal's hundreds of prophets cry and shout and dance and cut themselves all day, but no fire falls. "Shout louder!" says Elijah; "Maybe he's asleep, or gone on a journey!" Not until the prophet Isaiah ridicules people who carry wooden idols around on their shoulders, set them down and then bow to ask their help, does anyone use such derisive language about "other gods."

Baal's prophets call, but "there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention." As evening falls, Elijah has his altar, wood and sacrifice dowsed with three jars of water - a sacrifice in itself - and prays

“O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel (remember how God renamed Jacob as Israel?), let it be known today that you are God in Israel.” “Let the people know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back to you.” And as the darkness falls, fire falls and consumes the sacrifice, the wood, the altar, the water, the earth!

The onlookers fall on their faces and cry out “The LORD - he is God! The LORD - he is God!” Seize the prophets of Baal, orders Elijah; and they are taken down to the valley below and slaughtered. Elijah confronts Ahab. “Rain is coming,” he says. “Sit, eat, drink.” Humbled for a moment, Ahab sits at the prophet’s table on the mountain and eats his food. Elijah and his servant climb to the summit, look out over the Mediterranean, and see the first clouds appearing in the west. By the time they have all descended the mountain, a rain storm is upon them. Ahab heads back by chariot to Jezreel, 25 miles inland; Elijah “with the power of the LORD upon him” gets there ahead of him on foot and is first to announce the great victory of YHWH the LORD!

4) *Wavering*

It’s a tremendous story! Where will it all lead? Will all Israel return to the LORD? Will the people repent of their idolatry? What will happen to Elijah? What will Ahab, and especially Jezebel, do next?

We shall see. But we have also to ask: what has all this to teach us? How often does “the fire of God” descend to convince his people? What brings about repentance, faith, renewal of worship? Is anyone spared because a contest is set up that “the LORD wins”? Can you “test God” this way, asking him to prove himself so that you can have faith? Is it right to say “O God, if you really are God, do this miracle, heal this child, get me out of this

mess, and I will believe in you”? Or is this all too melodramatic to have any meaning in our lives of faith?

Perhaps we should simply note that the LORD provided for Elijah in a time of trouble, and that is a metaphor and a promise for the way God says he will always deal with his people. But we should surely not turn the page on Mt. Carmel without pondering Elijah’s challenge: which lies at the heart of the story “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him!”

I suspect that we all, like the Israelites, waver more than we would like to admit. Divided people that we are on the inside, we find it hard to make a total commitment to God. Part of us has heard the Gospel of Jesus; felt the prompting of the Spirit; responded in faith to God’s call; wants to know his will and do it; wants to love him and please him just as he has loved us. But another part of us is too busy for all that; wants other things than God wants; has many other priorities; and -strangely - imagines God will just “get in line” along with our children, our grandchildren, our spouses, our jobs, our health needs, our financial problems, our enjoyments and leisure. So we try to compromise - after all we don’t want to seem like religious fanatics! - we can give an hour (but not much more) on a Sunday to our church; we try to be “good Christians” in dealing with other people during the week; but that’s about it. We are *very* busy people.

Wavering? I fear so. We have many “gods,” and it seems that we have to give time to all of them. Sports must have its time (do you know how many churches will abandon their pm-programs today for the Super Bowl?), career must have its time; shopping must have its time; vacations must have their time. Why are all churches half empty some

Sundays? Because “it’s a holiday weekend!” Why are so many families deciding that sports is more important than Sunday worship or Sunday School? Our SS staff would like to know how they are supposed to arrange programs for over 80 children who are enrolled, 40 or more who are present for the Christmas Pageant, and 9 in the elementary age “rotation groups” who are here in mid-January? (You may say I am “preaching to the choir” in asking *you* that – after all, you are here!)

But if the LORD is God, should we not follow him? I don’t think it’s satisfactory to answer that you can “meet him just as well on the sports field!” Can faith in God be “just one more thing” to fit into a busy life? When I was considering leaving science for pastoral ministry, I read somewhere the comment “If there is anything at all to what we say about faith in God, any truth at all in these words, it’s hard to see how that could be *just a little bit* important.” That sentence has made a difference to my life ever since.

I think we are all called, not just occasionally in big decisions, but every day, to answer Elijah’s question: “How long will you waver? If the LORD is God, then follow him...”

Let us pray...