



“Limping Between Two Options”

Preaching Text: 1 Kings 18:20-39

2 June 2013

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC, Arlington, Texas

For June and the first Sunday in July our worship series comes from 1 & 2 Kings—originally one Hebrew language scroll. Today our sermon will be a long text and good story, told during a time when many in Israel (the northern kingdom) favored worshipping alien pagan gods (including Baal, the rain god), rather than worship Yahweh. Certainly, King Ahab’s wife, Jezebel promotes Baal worship. She persecutes those who follow Yahweh. The story takes place in a time of drought and famine. Elijah prophesies that because Ahab has forsaken the commands of the Lord that the famine and drought in Samaria will continue to be severe. Elijah throws down a challenge about whose God is more powerful: the prophets of Baal and Asherah or the God of Israel. Hear our lesson for the day from 1 Kings 18:20-21 (22-29), 30-39:

20 So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. 21 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.

22 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. 23 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. 24 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!” 25 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.” 26 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.

27 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.” 28 Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. 29 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.



30 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; 31 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;” 32 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. 33 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.” 34 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, 35 so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

36 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. 37 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.” 38 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. 39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God” (1 Kings 18:20-21 (22-29), 30-39).

The contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal offers a satire that sensationalizes the futility of false religion and underscores the truth that Israel’s God alone can work wonders. False gods are shown to be feeble. And worship of false gods leads to bad endings. This story is about the categorical rejection of idols, but also reminds us about bad things done in the name of good religion. Not all parts of the Bible are blood-thirsty, but the Deuteronomic History is disclosed when Israel’s faith was in dire peril and loyalty to Yahweh meant survival (concept adapted from *Feasting on the Word—Year C, Volume 3*).

While we do not condone violence because Jesus said “love your enemies,” this story does make a more subtle point—less dramatic, but no less true—than “whacking false prophets.” Ahab sees Elijah as a trouble-maker; Elijah retorts that the fault is with Ahab: he has deserted God and followed Baal. The stage is set for a contest to settle the issue: whose god can end the drought? The Israelites, together with the



many “prophets” of Baal, and Elijah, assemble on Mount Carmel. Elijah calls on the people to stop wavering: choose between Baal and “the LORD!” This is perhaps the most vital part of the story for us.

The “prophets of Baal” arrange a bull for sacrifice, and call on Baal to consume it with fire. Nothing happens for hours, despite the ritual of lacerating themselves. They keep trying until about 3 in the afternoon—note the very long time of their effort. Then Elijah to show how great Yahweh is puts wood on the altar pouring a lot of water on it. Immediately Yahweh’s fire devours the wood, stones, and bull—even the dust. The bottom line is that the people of Israel return to worshipping God. Who wouldn’t?

We have a more up-to-date enemy today—not one like “the worshippers of Baal or Asherah,” but those who think human beings can get along without God. Many in our culture believe that we need no God. Elijah’s display is a Deuteronomic reminder that our God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not only merciful but also powerful. The story is a humorous telling and a cutting satire on those who believe in false deities. Today, no doubt, it would be aimed at all those who are faltering, fence-sitting, and wavering people who are trying to get a direction to life’s meaning and value. “The Misery of Being Lukewarm” (28 Feb 2011, by Tom Jacobs, *Pacific Standard Magazine*)

notes:

Most of us have heard that spiritual fence-sitting makes us unhappy. Now there’s scientific evidence to prove it. A study led by a professor at the Yale School of Management surveyed over 6,000 people from all 50 states. People at the top of the religiously active scale reported much higher levels of well-being than the least religiously active people. But this was the surprise: people in the middle, the semi-religiously active group, “reported lower levels of well-being than atheists and agnostics.” If I may paraphrase, the researchers concluded: be hot or cold, but this lukewarm stuff is killing you. And, I might add, Jesus doesn’t like it either (psmag.com/culture-society/benefits-of-religion-limited-to-fervent-believers-2-28722).

Scripture offers many stories and images of what people of faith think and do for human good—which may be why God put us here in the first place. Amen.

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On decisions:

It was mealtime during our trip on a small airline.

“Would you like dinner?” the flight attendant asked the man seated in front of me.

“What are my choices?” he asked.

“Yes or no,” she replied.

Mary Farwell of Green Castle, Missouri, told of the time she was listening to her five year old son, Matthew, as he worked on his **Speak and Spell**[™] computer. He was concentrating intensely, typing in words for the computer to say back to him.

Matthew punched in the word “God.”

To his surprise, the computer said, “Word not found.” He tried again with the same reply. Staring at the computer in disgust he declared: “Jesus is not going to like this!”