

A Study of the Life of Elijah;

A Man Like Us.

Sermon # 6

“Showdown On Mt Carmel”

1 Kings 18:21-40

There are certain stories in the Bible that are so well known that just the mention of the person's name immediately brings to mind a particular event. When I say, Noah you think of the Ark, when I mention Daniel, you think of the Lion's Den and when I say Elijah you think of battle on Mt Carmel.

This contest on Mt Carmel had been in the making for forty-two months. Now is the time for the climax, which will be one dramatic demonstration that Jehovah is the one true God. For more than three years there has been no rain. The ground had dried and began to crack. All the vegetation is a uniform brown. The carcasses of dead animals littered the fields. When finally God speaks to Elijah and says, "Go see Ahab again."

Three years earlier God had said "Go, hide yourself." (1 Ki. 17:2) Now He says, "Go, show yourself." Think of the faith it required for Elijah to walk into the presence of Ahab. But because he had undergone the training at the brook and further training at Zarephath Elijah was ready.

Ahab greets Elijah with sarcasm, in verse seventeen he says, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel." The word "troubler" in Hebrew means "snake". Before Ahab could say anything else, Elijah said, "Its time for the truth to come out. It's time for the people to decide."

In 1 Kings 18:19 Elijah had challenged Ahab to gather all the prophets of Baal to Mt Carmel to a contest to determine who really is the God of Israel.

Tonight I want to share four truths to observe if you want to witness the power of God.

First, If You Want To Witness The Power of God You Must Decide Step And Be Counted (vv. 20-21)

Upon the appointed day they met on the top of Mt. Carmel and we pick up the story in verse twenty and twenty-one. "So Ahab sent for all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel. (21) And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him."

Elijah issues a challenge to the people to stop being so indecisive. The wavering practice of the people is revealed in the word “falter” in verse twenty-one. This does not mean to stop and think something over, it means to waver between two opinions. That is, a person who never makes up their mind as to what position, action or attitude they are going to take. They were not completely sold out to Baal but neither were they completely loyal to Jehovah. They are like Elvis Presley. I am told that he wore a Cross, a Star of David and as well as a Muslim symbol, just in case. But the truth is that God desires and demands decision. You must be for Him or against Him. But he will not permit the option of remaining neutral. In Matt 12:30 Jesus states, “He that is not with me is against me.”

Unfortunately the people’s response to Elijah in the later part of verse twenty-one was, “But the people answered him not a word.” Of all the things that plague modern Christianity perhaps spiritual indecision is still the greatest! The inability of the people of God to make up our minds, to decide which side we’re really on, the inability of young people and adults and singles and those whose are married, the inability of every age and every group inside our churches to decide which team they are on.

We would do well to remember that the strongest words given to the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation is reserved for the church at Laodicea. The reason was clear, they were uncommitted and lukewarmness is nauseating to God.

To say nothing to God is to say, “No” to God. Many hundreds of years earlier Joshua had issued his famous challenge to the people of Israel in Joshua 24:15, “And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

If You Want To Witness The Power of God You Must Decide Step And Be Counted and ...

Secondly, If You Want To Witness The Power Of God You May Have To Be Willing To Stand Alone. (vv. 22-31)

In verse twenty-two Elijah said to the people, “I alone am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men. (23) Therefore let them give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it. (24) Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, He is God.” So all the people answered and said, “It is well spoken.”

This was designed to be a fair contest. Each religion was given exactly the same test. It was to be one bullock and one altar for each. And each was to call upon their god, and the one that answered by fire would be the true god.

History tells us that the worship of Baal was a particularly degraded religion. It was a bizarre mixture of idolatry perverted sexuality and child sacrifice. Baal was worshiped as the god of the sun and as the all-controlling god of crops and productivity of the land. Such a god would surely have lightning in his arsenal of weapons. If he could do anything he ought to be able to start a fire.

450 is not enough if you don't have God. One is always enough if you're on God's side. Elijah was outnumbered 450 to 1 but he was unafraid. As we say here in the South, "He was a fixin' to blow them away."

In my mind I envision two altars, not all that distant from one another – at least within sight of each other. On the one side is the altar of Baal functional because of its ongoing use. On the other side is the broken down altar of Jehovah just a remnant of what once had been.

In verse twenty-five he tells the prophets of Baal, "Choose one bull for yourselves and prepare it first, for you are many; and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it."

Elijah instructed the prophets of Baal to do whatever they thought needed to be done in order to entice Baal to send fire from heaven. You can almost hear the sarcasm in Elijah's voice as he says, "There are so many of you boys you can go first."

In verse twenty-six the prophets begin to carry out Elijah's instructions, "So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, "O Baal, hear us!" But there was no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made."

In spite of all of their efforts, nothing happened. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. Verse twenty-seven says, "And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."

Baal was a "god" with human qualities, and Elijah forcefully drives this home, along with their implications. Perhaps their "god" is preoccupied in thought like a husband who ignores his wife while reading his paper. When Elijah suggests that perhaps Baal might be "busy" he uses a Hebrew word that has a variety of meaning. Some would say that means he has gone to the bathroom or he is on the toilet. ... It's crude but it presses home the point of the inferiority of their "god". What a pathetic god this would be! Maybe there is just "out of the office" at the moment and can't be reached. He doesn't even have a beeper or a cell phone. Perhaps he has dozed off, like some people do in church, oblivious to what's being said. If he was sleeping, there was only one solution: yell louder to get his attention. Elijah was brutal in his attack, but this is no time for subtlety. Either their "god" was God or he was not! If he was not available at a critical time like this, then he could never be counted on; he should never be trusted and especially if the God of Israel did respond.

The prophets become even more frantic for verse twenty-eight and twenty-nine tells us, "So they cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them. (29) And when midday was past, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice. But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention."

The prophets of Baal engaged in a display of ecstatic utterances for we are told "they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice." (v. 28) Their worship became more and more out of control in which they actually sought to be control by the deity. Rhythmic dancing was used to gain this loss of self control, along with loud crying, leaping and self-mutilation. Yet no matter how much they shouted or what ecstatic utterances we issued nothing happened. Their god was deaf and dumb no fire fell.

The Bible speaks plainly about the futility of worshiping idols (Psalm 115:5-8) "They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; (6) They have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell; (7) They have hands, but they do not handle; Feet they have, but they do not walk; Nor do they mutter through their throat. (8) Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them."

The misguided actions of the prophets of Baal remind us of a very important truth. Faith and sincerity are not enough. Faith is only as good as its object. It does matter in whom your faith is placed and all paths are not equally true. Neither is sincerity enough, No one could fault these prophets as not being sincere but they were sincerely wrong!

If You Want To Witness The Power Of God You May Have To Be Willing To Stand Alone....

Third, If You Want To Witness The Power of God You Must Rebuild the Altars That Are Broken Down (18:30-35)

Once the people tired of watching the prophets of Baal unsuccessful attempts, Elijah calls for the attention of the people in verse thirty, "Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down. (31) And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Israel shall be your name." (32) Then with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD; and he made a trench around the altar large enough to hold two seahs of seed. (33) And he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood..."

So sometime in the afternoon Elijah began the process of rebuilding the altar and preparing his sacrifice. There is a two-fold significance to what Elijah did; (1) He rebuilt the altar that was broken down. The fact that the altar was in a state of disrepair was a powerful symbol of just how far the people were, from god. He used twelve stones one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel (even though Israel at this point was divided into a northern and southern

kingdom). (2) He readied his sacrifice for late afternoon – about the time for the evening sacrifice.

Elijah went on to say in the later part of verse thirty-three, “Fill four waterpots with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice and on the wood.” (34) Then he said, “Do it a second time,” and they did it a second time; and he said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time. (35) So the water ran all around the altar; and he also filled the trench with water.”

Elijah tells the people to fill four “water-pots” with water. Some commentators believe the word should translated “barrels.” But regardless of how you translate the word, a substantial amount of water was used to literally soak the altar of God.

The water was not necessary, the water was just to convince the people there was no trickery involved, it really was God who had answered. Elijah made it impossible for anything to happen, other than what god alone could do!!

If You Want To Witness The Power of God You Must Rebuild the Altars That Are Broken Down...

Fourth, If You Want To Witness The Power of God You Must Have A God Who Hears and Answers Prayers (vv. 36-38)

Notice the great contrast between the pagan ways of contacting their god and the way that Jehovah has set out for his people. In verse thirty-six we read, “And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, “LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. (37) Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.”

There is no frenzy or nor even a prescribed ritual to follow. Elijah in full control of his faculties offered a simple prayer. The prophet Isaiah makes a profound promise about answered prayer in Isaiah 65:24, “It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; And while they are still speaking, I will hear.”

In his prayer Elijah prayed for three things;

- (1) *He prayed that God would be recognized as the one true God*
- (2) *He prayed that people would know that he was truly his prophet*
- (3) *He prayed that the hearts of the people would be turned back to Jehovah.*

The result of Elijah's prayer is given in verse thirty-eight, "Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. (39) Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!" (40) And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!" So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there."

Three important things happened as a result of Elijah's prayer.

First, the fire fell. Where moments before an altar and sacrifice stood; there now remained only a burned, fire-blackened hole in the ground. Fire that can consume not just the water soaked wood and sacrifice, but the stones and the dirt as well cannot be kindled by human hands. This was evidence that Elijah not had by some trickery produced the fire.

Secondly, the people recognize that Jehovah is the one true God and fall down and cry out, "Jehovah He is God. Jehovah He is God!" (v. 39)

Third, the people seize and execute the prophets of Baal. All 450 prophets of Baal are slain but the 400 prophets of Ashtoreth (the female counter part to Baal) apparently were not present at Mt Carmel. Apparently Jezebel fearful of the outcome had prevailed upon Ahab to exempt those who ate at her table from the test.

Conclusion

Here is brain-teaser for you. If three frogs are sitting on a log and two decide to jump off, how many frogs are left sitting on the log? The answer is three. You haven't jumped off the log because you decided too. Deciding counts for nothing. You're still on the log until you actually jump off the log.

So how does that relate to us on this Sunday evening? You can say you have decided to follow Jesus. You sing about following Jesus. You can shout about following Jesus. But you not following him until you're following him. I don't care what you have decided. It's not your decisions that matter, it your actions that matter.

Let me put Elijah's challenge into our modern context; "If Jesus is God, follow Him! If anything else or anyone else is God, follow them. But stop playing games. Stop sitting on the fence. Take a stand for what you know is true."