

The Contest on Carmel

1 Kings 18

Intro: This week we have read about Israel's roller coaster obedience and disobedience to God, a rebellion that ends in Assyrian and Babylonian captivity.

1 Kings 16:32 illustrates the depth to which Israel fell –

Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

His monarchy is represented in the 3-year drought prophesied by Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1-7 in which even the tiniest brooks dried up *"because there was no rain in the land"* (17:7).

Ahab was married to the Phoenician, Jezebel, whose God is Baal and whose priests built a temple to Baal in Israel's capitol city, Samaria. Many of the Jews were worshipping there.

Elijah bursts onto the scene in 17. He served during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah.

His name means *"Yahweh is my God."* In other words, his name is the name by which God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3:14) and the confession of Israel at the Red Sea (Ex 14:31). When other gods contested for Israel's faith, God proved himself and the people united around the God who saved them.

17:8-16 - In the midst of that spiritual drought, illustrated by the physical drought that Israel is enduring, Elijah performed miracles, demonstrating what God can and will do on behalf of his people if only they will repent and obey him.

Elijah's three miracles in chapters 17-18 are God's "handfuls on purpose" to Israel.

a) The Widow's Famine 17:8-16

- Even though Israel is acting like a widow – as though God is dead
- God can redeem save Israel from what is starving their souls
- if only the nations will listen to his prophet and obey his word (15)

But they will not. Israel will be taken into Assyrian captivity in 722 and Judah will go into Babylonian captivity in 586.

b) The Widow's Son 17:17-24

At that point, Elijah's next miracle demonstrates that it will take, not resuscitation, but resurrection, to save Israel. The widowed nation's "illness was so severe that there was no

breath left in him" (17:17). But God will resurrect the nation and bring them out of captivity back into the Promised Land.

This is because, Yahweh is not only Elijah's God but the only God.

Transition: Everything in the story about Elijah is moving toward this ultimate showdown between God and Baal on Mount Carmel. Once again, as happened in Egypt, the question, "Who is God?" is going to be answered. Elijah frames it like this - **TEXT**

1 Kings 18:21 - *"How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."*

The question is both ancient and modern. This is an important question in an election year. Is politics our God? Are protests our God? Are news organizations our god? The contest between Republicans and Democrats; police and protestors; FOX and CNN, is just as real. Everyone is begging for your vote. Everyone is building altars. What is the source of our salvation?

It's an important question because our temporal savior is also our eternal savior.

First: The First Commandment. 21a

The Contest on Carmel is a dramatic depiction of the first commandment –

Exodus 20:1-2 - *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ "You shall have no other gods before me.*

In that verse, God claims to do what Baal did not and what modern gods cannot do; rescue his people.

And as a result, God claims sole allegiance of our hearts

The Shema of Deut 6:4-5 is repeated by no one less than Jesus in the Gospels –

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Mt 22:37).

In our text the people no longer follow the Lord alone. They have not abandoned him completely, but they are flirting with another god at the same time. They are limping between Yahweh, the covenant Lord, and Baal, the fertility god. This is an issue of faithfulness because they have broken their covenant promise to the Lord.

The best comparison to this “unfaithfulness” on the part of Israel is to that of a marriage relationship. Israel, the “bride”, has been unfaithful to her “husband.” This is why the main character in Elijah’s two earlier miracles is a widow. Israel is acting as though God is dead.

Carmel’s contest is repeated daily in our own hearts.

Picture – Jeroboam’s altar - In Israel, Solomon’s son, Jeroboam, hid his altars in the mountains and forests. Our altars are not so large or visible. But we have them. I hope that your CG discussions will work to uncover them and work out solutions for dismantling them.

No one is simply an atheist. Everyone has a god; some functional savior that we create or worship to make us feel whole

Jeremiah 2:13 - ...my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Second: Israel’s Response(s). 21b

First response: *“And the people did not answer him a word.” (21b)*

A key word in our text is the word “answer”.

Who will answer the question brought by Elijah in verse 21? Who will give an answer to the challenge which he sets up in verses 22-24? *“the God who answers by fire, he is God.”*

The silence is so loud it has to be noticed. Their silence is indicative of their guilt and a reminder of their failure to maintain their love for God –

Joshua 24:16 - *“Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods...”*

Joshua warned the people about how serious the vow was that they were making. But on that day the people were not lost for an answer. In fact, they were eager to answer.

Joshua 24:19-20 - *But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.”*

At issue in the people’s silence before the prophet is that they have forgotten their “first love,” something the Lord accused the Ephesian church of as well (Rev. 2:4). They have forgotten the Lord and their covenant relationship with him. Operating in the background is the word which Elijah spoke to Ahab alone in 1 Kings 18:18. Elijah said to Ahab, *“You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals.”*

Third: The Contest on Carmel. 20-46

Picture of Mount Carmel

- a) As happened in Egypt with Pharaoh and Jerusalem with Sennacherib, Elijah gives home-field advantage to Baal and his prophets. Mt. Carmel is a Canaanite stronghold considered sacred by the prophets of Baal.
- b) He also allows them to petition Baal first. If their god answers with fire, the contest is over.
- c) He also soaked his sacrifice three times (Trinity / 3rd day resurrection)

(He soaked the sacrifice with twelve jars of water during a drought)

- d) Elijah's prayer – 36-39

And once again, as is traditional in Scripture and life, Israel turns back to God after God has proven himself.

Second response: *"The LORD (YAHWEH), he is God; the LORD, he is God."* (39)

Fourth: Our Application

As the Samaritan woman at the well in the NT reveals, Israel and Judah first divided over where to worship (John 4:19-20) and then over whom to worship. In the end, both nations were taken into captivity.

There are many things tearing at the fabric of the church today.

- There are many gods contesting for your allegiance.
- Ahabs and Jezebels are everywhere, building altars and demanding that you worship. But...

Unity is not something we create.
It is something we maintain.
We are united in Jesus as his body.

We should unite and remain united around this confession, *“The Lord, he is God!”* And because he is our God and we are his people, nothing apart from that confession should threaten our unity.

There is no question that God is using Covid-19 and our national unrest as a call to his people to affirm their faith in him alone.

Can we, even before a vaccination for Covid-19 and the election, say, *“The Lord, he is God?”*

Christian unity does not mean the elimination of diversity in the body. Christ’s willingness to receive people who have varying opinions on various issues (see Rom. 14) indicates that our Lord does not seek a kind of unity that amounts to stark uniformity on every matter. There is latitude for differences of opinion in the body of Christ as long as the gospel is not overthrown in the process.

God seeks unity amid diversity, which should not be surprising because as a Trinity, He exhibits both unity and diversity—He is one in essence and three in person. As believers live in harmony, we reflect the Holy Trinity and the unity and diversity that characterizes God’s very existence.

These issues will pass only to be replaced by others. The Gospel will remain. Let us not pledge our allegiance to temporal, passing matters and, in so doing, diminish the worth of the Gospel of Jesus who alone can save us.

Romans 15:5-6 - *May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

Can you? Will you welcome those brothers and sisters who disagree with you in the same way that “Christ has welcomed you” when he disagreed with you?

This is important for many reasons but one is our witness to the world.

We can only love the church and the world as we first love God. As we subject every other allegiance to that single confession, that *“The Lord, he is God”* and nothing else.

It is, after all, only God who can send “a great rain” (41-46).

Community Groups:

1 – How is your heart?

2 – How are those you love?

3 – How has your relationship to the church changed; improved, weakened, etc during this pandemic?

4 – What has been the greatest blessing during this pandemic?

5 –What did Ahab and Jezebel’s do to weaken Israel’s faith?

6 - How do Elijah’s two miracles in chapter 17 speak to Israel’s relationship to God during Ahab’s reign?

7 – Name the ways that Elijah give the prophets of Baal homefield advantage?

8 - What are some ‘functional’ gods people are trusting today?

9 – What are the altars people are demanding we worship at today?

10 – How are you sharing Christ when confronted by these challenges?

11 – How could these things threaten the unity of the church?

12 – What are you doing to maintain the unity of the church?

13 – How can you and your CG work to maintain the unity of the church?

14 – How can you and your CG work to present the gospel to the world?

FYI:

*Saul – reigned 40 years

* David – reigned 40 years

* Solomon – reigned 40 years

* Then....

920 BC – Israel is divided into two kingdoms

720 BC – Israel taken into Assyrian captivity

586 BC – Judah taken into Babylonian captivity

King Solomon created the wealthiest and most powerful central government the Hebrews would ever see, but he did so at an impossibly high cost. Land was given away to pay for his extravagances and people were sent into forced labor into Tyre in the north.

When Solomon died, between 926 and 922 BCE, the ten northern tribes refused to submit to his son, Rehoboam, and revolted.

From this point on, there would be two kingdoms of Hebrews: in the north - Israel, and in the south - Judah. The Israelites formed their capital in the city of Samaria, and the Judaeans kept their capital in Jerusalem. These kingdoms remained separate states for over two hundred years.

The Hebrew empire eventually collapses, Moab successfully revolts against Judah, and Ammon successfully secedes from Israel. Within a century of Solomon's death, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were left as tiny little states - no bigger than Connecticut - on the larger map of the Middle East. But their land was important as a trading route between the Mesopotamian kingdoms and Egypt. As a result, they were constantly pulled between those kingdoms and eventually lost to Assyria and Babylon.

