Fire on the Mountain

Purpose

To demonstrate the contrast between false gods and the true God

Hearing the Word

The background text this lesson is 1 Kings 18:1-46.

1 Kings 18:20-39 (NIV)

20 So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel.
21 Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.
22 Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets.
23 Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set 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—he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”
25 Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.”
26 So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.
27 At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”
28 So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.
29 Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.
30 Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down.
31 Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.”
32 With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed.
33 He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.”
34 “Do it again,” he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time.
35 The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.
36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “Lord, the 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.
37 Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”
38 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.
39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”

1 Kings 18:20-39 (KJV)

20 So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto mount Carmel.
21 And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.
22 Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I
only, remain a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men.

23 Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under:

24 And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord; and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken.

25 And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire under.

26 And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made.

27 And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.

28 And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them.

29 And it came to pass, when midday was past, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.

30 And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto 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, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be thy name:

32 And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed.

33 And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.

34 And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time.

35 And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water.

36 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,
emotional crisis.

Church business meetings were a great place for me to watch this scenario play out. I especially observed this during times when the congregation was making important decisions. A first step was to rally as many members as possible so as to get everyone’s opinion about the matter. Enthusiasm and excitement ran high over these new ventures. Everyone wanted to be a part of the process and make their contribution. However, when ideas clashed, the story often changed. Shall we tear down or shall we remodel? Shall we do it now or shall we wait? You mean you want to get rid of this furniture piece that her grandfather made for the church?

What began as a calm and exciting time to put our heads together had all of a sudden become a potential battleground. People handled the situation in different ways. Some folks would outright confront with strong and argumentative protest. Others quietly sat back with little to say in what appeared to be a “go along to get along” attitude. Real feelings, however, were likely to be shared on telephone lines after the meeting had ended. Hidden resentments over decisions made were often harbored in the minds of some that occasionally popped up over the years. The only thing people totally agreed on was that we need to agree on something.

Elijah’s Mount Carmel experience helps us see the tensions that might arise when we seek to affirm our faith in a world of diverse ideas.

Two Opinions

Our background Scripture sets the tone and circumstances for this mountain-top duel between a prophet and a king. During this time, Israel was in dire social and economic need. First Kings 17:1 tells us that God sent the prophet Elijah to announce to the Northern Kingdom that a drought would come upon the land. The land would see “neither dew nor rain for three years.” This drought or famine would ultimately bring devastation and hardship upon the entire nation. It was during the third year of this drought that Elijah received a message from God (1 Kings 18:1). The prophet was to go and tell King Ahab that the Lord would now send rain once again. Certainly this would have been good news to the inhabitants of this thirsty land. Furthermore, Ahab would seemingly have been happy to see Elijah and hear this message. However, this meeting between king and prophet was anything but cordial.

Elijah’s message and mission was clear. He had not only come to bring good news (rain), but also to denounce evil that had plagued the land. This evil was idolatry and especially idolatrous worship as endorsed by King Ahab. “You deserted the LORD’S commands and followed the Baals” was the prophet’s message (verse 18). This public indictment would force the hand of King Ahab to gather all the people of Israel along with the 450 prophets of Baal to settle this matter once and for all.

Elijah’s first order of business was not to correct King Ahab or even the prophets. Instead, his first concern was directed toward the people of Israel. “How long will you hobble back and forth
between two opinions?” (verse 21) Probably no one had expected to be addressed in this way, as, “The people gave no answer” (verse 21). Yet this question seemingly cut to the hearts of many who were present. Elijah was challenging their faith as true believers in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The statement, “If the Lord is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal” (verse 21) suggests a level of frustration and maybe even anger toward these Israelites by the prophet. The undertone was that many of them were “straddling the fence” in terms of their loyalty toward Jehovah God. Like confused children, they were hobbling back and forth from one deity to the next. Elijah clearly saw this behavior as hypocritical and a mockery of the living God.

The question “how long will you hobble back and forth” was not only a question for these Israelites, but it is a question for Christians today. Often our timidity and hesitancy to share our faith (especially with nonbelievers) suggests that deep down we are perhaps unsure about our witness. We may think the safe thing to do in such situations is to say nothing rather than risk offending and being misunderstood by the other person. The irony of this attitude is that we are members of a denomination that challenges and encourages us to go and make disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.

So, how do we modern-day Christians share our faith in a living God among what Elijah might call Baals? First, this is not a new question nor is it a new challenge to our faith. Our witness is not a call to be dogmatic and condescending toward those who do not share our beliefs. However, our faith begins with a clear acknowledgement and understanding of who we are in Christ. The awareness of God’s redemptive love and presence working in my life gives me a biblical right to, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). The Common English Bible and other translations of the Bible use the word “defend” or “defense” as an expression of our loyalty to the faith. Therefore, as a fellow citizen of the world, I can share my faith and spiritual journey with others without apprehension and simply allow the Holy Spirit to work through me to usher forth the kingdom of God into the world. Respect for others of different persuasions does not call us to denounce or reject our faith. I am grateful and blessed to be part of a denomination that does not put its “go ye” under a bushel basket.

**How does Elijah’s bold and confrontational faith posture personally speak to you?**

**Tensions Mount**

When Elijah started to detail the plans for the encounter with the prophets of Baal, it no doubt made an impression on everyone present. This prophet was serious! It did not matter to Elijah that he was outnumbered. In fact, he told the people that “I am the last of the Lord’s prophets” (verse 22). So what? At first glance this prophet was either crazy or he knew something that King Ahab and his cohorts did not know. He confidently ordered the attendants to “Give us two
bulls” (verse 23). The next instructions were that Baal’s prophets would choose one of the bulls, and he and the people of God would take the other one. In traditional and ceremonial fashion, each side would prepare their sacrifice. We can only imagine the tension and excitement that was slowly building up in the minds and hearts of those present.

Everything was set, ready, and about to go. However, a key part of Elijah’s instructions before this holy event began was that no fire would be placed on the altar by either side. The seriousness of following this last step is highlighted by the fact that the prophet on three occasions told this congregation not to add fire to the sacrifice (verses 23, 25). How then would the test of divine superiority be determined? Elijah’s message was, “The god who answers with fire—that’s the real God!” (verse 24). We can only imagine what was behind the people’s reply of, “That’s an excellent idea” (verse 24). Were they as confident as Elijah that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would declare sovereignty as Supreme God? Or were they simply in the crowd to see what would happen? The absence of fire along with the need for fire to make the sacrifice complete would call for divine and supernatural intervention.

What are we to make of Elijah when he started “making fun” of the prophets of Baal (verse 27)? In childlike fashion, he started taunting and teasing these prophets as if to say, “Ha, ha! I told you so!” The fact that these prophets had wailed and screamed and even did a hopping dance from morning to midday would have only heightened Elijah’s taunting insults in their minds. These prophets were very likely a little embarrassed, frustrated, and even annoyed with the response of their god. Their cry, “Great Baal, answer us!” had seemingly fallen on deaf ears (verse 26). This open and public criticism no doubt played a key role in dampening the hopes of these prophets to prevail in this situation.

In the name of human respect, I do not condone offensive language even for people I think might deserve it. On the surface, Elijah likely appears to some people as a little arrogant and what others might call “cocky.” However, (and not condoning arrogance), the flip side of this coin is that Elijah’s confidence in God comes through loud and clear. He had no doubt that God was the real God.

We like to think that unconsciously his purpose was to educate these pagan prophets into the faith of the real God. Perhaps his overzealous attitude and comments were a bit much, but no one can overlook his faith and commitment to the God of Israel. He was sure of God and not afraid to declare his allegiance. However we understand the tone of this prophet, the Lord’s sovereignty as Supreme God was under attack and truth had to emerge.

**How do you feel when people criticize your faith? What are some ways that you might restore fellowship with them?**

**Fire From Heaven**

After the taunting and teasing match had ended, Elijah set the stage for God’s sovereignty and power to come forth. It would be a hands-on lesson for the people that they would never forget. He
called the people (“Come here!”; verse 30) and reminded them that a first order of business was to repair the Lord's altar. God's dignity and sovereignty as the God of Israel must be restored for all to see. The text does not mention how this altar was destroyed or why it was even on Mount Carmel. However, the fact that an altar was present representing Israel's God demanded that it be restored as a place of honor and respect.

The prophet next called on the people to remember their history as the people of God. They were the covenant people. Elijah took twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel and rebuilt the damaged altar. These twelve stones represented the twelve sons of Jacob. They were not just stones set in place as ceremonial pieces, but they were a clear and vivid reminder of Israel’s spiritual journey. These stones would forever remind these Israelites of who they were as a people and whom they were to serve and give their allegiance. Therefore, it was imperative and absolutely necessary in the mind of Elijah that this holy place be restored. Furthermore, the Lord had given this prophet specific instructions to set these matters of God in order (verse 36).

After the altar had been restored, the next step was to prepare the sacrifice. The storyline shows that Elijah was careful and methodical in what can be seen as the handling of holy things. The details of verses 33-34 show the prophet’s unshakeable faith and trust in God to do the miraculous. He instructed the people to fill four jars with water and pour it on the sacrifice. Not once, not twice, but three times! This public act may have appeared a little boastful to some on the part of Elijah; however, doing this would have erased any idea of trickery on the part of this prophet when heaven’s fire came. It also showed Elijah’s utmost confidence in God to be God in a difficult and divisive situation.

Elijah’s short but powerful prayer captures the essence of the why of this Mount Carmel extravaganza. His confrontation with Ahab and the prophets of Baal was not to satisfy a personal agenda. Yes, Ahab and Elijah were not the best of friends and saw each other as menaces to the land. However, Elijah came as a servant of God to restore a sinful and rebellious nation. He came to show God’s sovereignty to all humankind and to make it public knowledge that God is the real God. His attempt to bring about spiritual restoration to a rebellious nation had to be candidly proclaimed and openly demonstrated. The joy and blessings of new life always override the appearance of how we bring about this change. When people come into the knowledge of God, hearts change and the foundation for true restoration begins.

After Elijah had finished his prayer, the text says that fire came down from heaven (verse 38). This is the crowning act of this event and the ultimate proof that God is Sovereign King of the universe. When the people witnessed this great display of power, they fell on their faces and declared that, “The LORD is the real God!” (verse 39). They no longer had a superficial and shallow idealism about God, but a life-changing experience that
removed all doubt about the God of their ancestors. The high note of this “answer by fire” verse for me is not in trying to theologically unravel the how of this miracle, but simply to acknowledge and embrace the reality of a true and living God who lives in the now of life. Let this story challenge you this week to embrace the truth and power of divine love extended toward humankind. Believe that God is real and graciously rewards those who diligently seek and try to find God (see Hebrews 11:6). “All hail the power of Jesus’ name! Let angels prostrate fall.”

**What religious or other symbols remind you of your allegiance to God? Why?**

O Lord our God, we bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, “My God, how great Thou art!” In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.