

“Limping With Two Opinions”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
I Kings 18:20-39; Luke 7:1-0

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One verse at the end of I Kings 16 provides the context for both this morning’s and next Sunday’s Hebrew Scripture readings: “[King] Ahab did more [evil] to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.”

So, we ask, “what did he do?” It seems the clincher is linked to his marriage to Jezebel – yes, that Jezebel of “She’s such a Jezebel” fame. As you have probably noticed, Jezebel is not among the top 1,000 names given to girl babies.

To avoid venturing into gender politics, suffice it to say, the problem is not really that Ahab had a foreign wife, and perhaps not even that her Canaanite gods were part of her dowry. The problem was Ahab had taken the initiative to build an altar for the worship of Ba’al. Ba’al was the Canaanite god of agriculture, under which fell responsibility for the weather, particularly rain in the dry climate.

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel had a mixed religion marriage. For a modern day parallel, you may know a Jewish-Christian couple that incorporates both faith traditions in their family life, such as celebrating Hanukkah and Christmas in December. So, one might think King Ahab was simply seeking to please his wife and accommodate her religious tradition. Yet, by building that altar for Ba’al, Ahab had crossed the faithfulness and jealousy line with the God of Israel. The king was seen as worshiping two gods, either trying to have it both ways, or playing one off against the other. Perhaps it would be similar to our seeking to accommodate and worship both Jesus and Santa Claus at Christmas.

God sends the prophet Elijah to King Ahab to announce a drought, and our lesson this morning is the concluding event before the drought is ended. King Ahab calls together the people of Israel and 450 prophets of Ba’al in a competition to pit Ba’al against Yahweh. I can’t help but recall those childhood standoffs where two children each declares, “My big brother can beat up your brother.”

So, welcome to Mount Carmel and the Sunday morning smackdown pitting Yahweh’s prophet, Elijah, against 450 prophets of Ba’al. Warning: some portions of this lesson could be offensive to ears sensitive to blood and violence, though you can be thankful we are not reading verse 40.

I Kings 18:20-39:

Narrator: So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. ²¹Elijah then came near to all the people, and said,

Elijah: ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’

Narrator: The people did not answer him a word. ²²Then Elijah said to the people,

Elijah: ‘I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal’s prophets number four hundred and fifty. ²³Let 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. ²⁴Then 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.’

Narrator: All the people answered,

Congregation: 'Well spoken!'

Narrator: ²⁵Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal,

Elijah: '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.'

Narrator: ²⁶So 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. ²⁷At noon Elijah mocked them, saying,

Elijah: '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.'

Narrator: ²⁸Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. ²⁹As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response. ³⁰Then Elijah said to all the people,

Elijah: 'Come closer to me'; ...

Narrator: ...and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; ³¹Elijah 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'; ³²with 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. ³³Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said,

Elijah: 'Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood.'

Narrator: ³⁴Then he said,

Elijah: 'Do it a second time';

Narrator: and they did it a second time. Again he said,

Elijah: 'Do it a third time';

Narrator: and they did it a third time, ³⁵so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water. ³⁶At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said,

Elijah: '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. ³⁷Answer 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.'

Narrator: ³⁸Then 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. ³⁹When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said,

Congregation: ‘The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.’

During the year between college and seminary, I served as a volunteer in mission for the Presbyterian Church. Having attended college in St. Louis, and driven those flat Midwestern roads back home on vacation breaks, I preferred an assignment in a region that had more hills than the flat Midwest. It appeared an assignment with the Appalachian Service project in West Virginia was close, but it then decided not to take volunteers that year; so, I accepted the position of activities director at Kemmerer Village, a Presbyterian children’s home in Assumption, Illinois – right smack in the middle of corn and soybean fields. It’s hard to find flatter Midwestern fields. Sometimes, God must smile at the difference between our desires and where we end up.

Each Sunday, we would take the Protestant children and youth to the Presbyterian Church in town, and I recall this was the first time I had ever heard people pray for rain. Oh, I had heard prayers for drought-stricken Africa, and even parts of our own country, but not from farmers whose own fields were parched, few of whom had the ability to irrigate. I remember wondering how God received those prayers, and what it would take for God to answer them directly. I’ve never really like the cliché about prayer, “Sometimes God answers by saying no,” and it seems especially callous when one’s crops are wilting in the field and one’s livelihood is on the line.

Answers to prayers for rain, or health, or almost anything else are rarely so immediate, clear and dramatic as in our Elijah story. This is when we can be tempted to turn to our own creations of the gods of Ba’al during the drought and desperate times in our own lives.

I thought that we don’t so much have a specific god like the rain god Ba’al, but a more generalist god, perhaps named the god of “whatever it takes.” In our very human faith, we say, “I will give God a chance, I will pray regularly, I will be patient, I will be faithful.” Even if an answer is not immediately clear, I will be patient and I will be faithful, and I will be patient and I will be faithful... to a point.”

It is at the point when the drought leaves us desperate, when our waiting seems prolonged, we may find ourselves limping to find a second opinion, or a third. When God stops being God the way we believe God is supposed to be God, solving our drought dilemmas according to our timetables of immediacy, we will be patient for a time, but at some point, we need rain, we need an answer – and we will do whatever it takes.

No, we won't name our "whatever it takes" chasings to be gods, and while there are times we seek relief from pain or despair in addictive escapes, many of our second opinions are in fact positive. We might find an author who speaks to us, and find ourselves following a purpose driven life under their guidance. Perhaps we begin a physical routine, spiritual discipline, or yoga or meditation technique that energizes us. Perhaps it is a diet focused more on feeling better not losing weight. It might be a volunteer opportunity, hobby or craft, or artistic or musical interest that gives us meaning. It could even be travel adventures meant to open our eyes to new cultures. We may even adopt a "whatever it takes" approach to our financial security. Most all of these are good things we follow or practice or do in order to quench a drought or fill a need in our lives.

The church may itself seek "whatever it takes" solutions in its own drought times of diminished membership or energy. Sometimes, the answers are envisioned arriving in a single person, but as I have shared before, you are in the midst of seeking a pastor, not a savior. Churches may also try "whatever it takes" programs of growth, plans for stewardship, or emphases on media, thinking perhaps being the tweeting church is the answer.

The danger is our "whatever it takes" personal habits or church plans can become competing gods without our even noticing we are worshiping them. We lose sight of who and whose we are called to be, and it takes an Elijah to notice and ask, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?"

As I worked with this question, my mind went back twenty-five years to a question asked in the movie, "City Slickers." Those who know the movie, will recall when Curly, played by Jack Palance, and Mitch, played by Billy Crystal, are alone on horses. Curly, the weathered western cowboy, seems a guru to the city slickers. He asks Mitch, "Do you know what the secret of life is?" while he holds up one finger. Curly then answers his own question: "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean [nothing.]"

Mitch asks, "But, what is the 'one thing?'"

Curly replies simply, "That's what you have to find out."

"How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" Elijah poses the question recognizing that seeking to worship two gods does not provide "anything it takes" security and stability, but leaves us limping, hobbled as one translation puts it. We discover the power of the story and the answer to Elijah's question may not be in the fire so hot it consumes not only the sacrificed bull but evaporates all the water around the altar. No, the power may be found in Elijah's words, his prayer to God, in which he says, *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.*

For me, the power of the story is not in God sending the consuming fire, but in God's ability to turn the people's hearts back, to end their limping along with two opinions. A part of me feels the fire is a dramatic distraction, for it can promote a view of faithfulness as only coming through powerful, visible evidence. The story of the centurion in our Gospel reading seems just as dramatic and easy as well, with neither the man nor his servant having any direct contact with Jesus. Yet, the testimony is that a centurion, one who had the power of death in his control, saw in Jesus one who had the power of life.

In our ordinary living, when such divine immediacy of rain or healing is rare, and “whatever it takes” temptations are strong, I look at Elijah. It would have been so easy for him to give up, and indeed he will try for Jezebel will now aggressively seek his death. Yet, even in our story, he stood alone on Mount Carmel, and while confident of his faith in God, he faced 450 prophets of Ba’al. The sheer numbers are overwhelming. A part of me believes that as faithful and strong as he seems, at some point he must have thought, “My God, I hope this works.”

I think back again to when we prayed for rain in that small Illinois town some forty years ago. If the skies had immediately opened upon the prayer’s “Amen,” I expect there would have been some new faith professions, even as others maintained the timing was coincidental. And, if it could have happened twice, I suspect even those purveyors of coincidence might be moved.

We share Elijah’s call, first to recognize when we and others have so many opinions, so many “whatever it takes” efforts, we find ourselves limping. And then, to be willing to be sent, to stand before others, sometimes as the lone voice of faith before overwhelming numbers, alternative opinions, and a slew of “whatever it takes” attitudes, to stand alone with a single opinion, that we believe God is not only present, but can bring an end, not only to drought, but hunger, and war, and violence. We stand in faith, because we are following the God we have seen in Jesus Christ.