

Prophets Series #1
1 Kings 18

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Elijah and the Contest on Mt. Carmel

INTRO: The prophet Elijah had announced there would be a drought in the land of Israel, a challenge to the Caananite god, Baal, which King Ahab and Queen Jezebel worshiped. A reading from the book of 1 Kings.

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" He answered, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. 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. 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. 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. 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!" 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." 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. 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." Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. 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.

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; 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"; 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. 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." 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, so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

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. 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." 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. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God." Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of rushing rain." So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." He went up and looked, and said, "There is nothing." Then he said, "Go again seven times." At the seventh time he said, "Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person's hand is rising out of the sea." Then he said, "Go say to Ahab, 'Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'" In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain. Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel. But the hand of the LORD was on Elijah; he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

The first six years of my life, my family lived in a house next to a brick church that stood out in the middle of farm fields just three miles from the border of Minnesota and Iowa. Across the road was the church cemetery. In the back yard behind the fence were the pigs that belonged to Ross Patton's aunt and uncle. There wasn't too much in the way of children's programming on TV yet – just the Howdy Doody Show, Captain Kangaroo and Romper Room, with Miss Betty asking us, "Are you a Do-Bee or a Don't-Be?"

Consequently, my mother had to come up with a lot of simple activities to keep my younger sister and me busy. One of the things I remember she had us do quite often was play with the latest marvel of story-telling technology, something called a flannelgraph. For the kids here who have never heard of such a thing, a flannelgraph was a board covered with flannel. Characters and props from a story were cut out of heavy paper that had a backing that would stick to the flannel. We kids could mix and match the characters to tell stories. My mom had a collection of flannelgraph sets that told Bible stories, and the one story I remember doing over and over again was this story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. We would build the altar of stones, then place the sacrifice on top, then put the water around the base of the altar so it looked like a moat. Then the fire would come down, burn up the sacrifice and the water, and Elijah would win the contest.

I'm not sure exactly what my understanding of this story was when I was five years old – probably nothing more than the good guy beat the bad guys, just like Roy Rogers and Mighty Mouse always did. But because of that flannelgraph, this has always been one of my favorite Bible stories.

Forty years later, I now have a much greater appreciation of the story and its message. It is a story with great relevance for us today. You might call it a dramatized version of the First Commandment. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, God began by saying “I am Yahweh your God (I am the LORD your God.) You shall have no other gods.” At the time of Moses (about the 13th century B.C.), the people did not yet understand that there is only one God in the universe. They understood that there were many gods – the Egyptians had gods, the Greeks had gods, the Canaanites had gods – but their God, the God of the descendants of Israel, was Yahweh, and they were to only worship Yahweh.

Four hundred years pass – Saul, David and Solomon have been kings over a united Israel, only to have the country split in 922 into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It is now about 860 B.C. and the king of Israel is Ahab. Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, is a Canaanite, and the Canaanites worship gods named Baal and Asherah. At Jezebel’s urging, Ahab sets up worship sites for Baal all around the country and actively discourages the worship of Yahweh. Then Elijah appears on the scene and confronts Ahab with his apostasy. It becomes a battle of the gods. Whose god will prove to be stronger and deserving of the people’s worship?

Baal was believed by the Canaanites to be the god responsible for sending rain. To show that Baal is weak, Elijah tells Ahab that Yahweh will prevent the rain from falling. And it doesn’t rain for two years. In the third year of the drought, Yahweh tells Elijah that it’s time for the drought to end, and this becomes the occasion for the contest on Mt. Carmel, a mountain right on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Elijah gives the prophets of Baal every possible advantage – they get to pick which bull to sacrifice, they get dry wood that will burn easily, and given as much time as they wish to invoke Baal to send fire from the sky. Since Baal is supposedly the sender of rain, it should be no problem for Baal to send a lightning bolt to ignite the sacrifice.

The prophets of Baal take most of the day, but Baal does not respond to their prayers and chants and dances. Then it’s Elijah’s turn. To show that what is about to happen is no fluke, he drenches his sacrifice with water so it will not burn easily. And in response to Elijah’s prayer to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Yahweh strikes the sacrifice with a lightning bolt and vaporizes it. And the people proclaim, “Yahweh, the LORD, is indeed God.”

That’s the First Commandment: “I am Yahweh your God. You shall have no other gods.” The people on Mt. Carmel that day got this message very clearly. But that’s an ancient story, from a time when even Elijah believed that other gods like Baal existed. In a few more generations, the prophets of Israel began to realize that Yahweh was not one God among many, but that Yahweh was the only God and that these other gods were make-believe – nothing more than a piece of wood, stone, or metal.

That’s what Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe today – there is only one God. We call this monotheism. So the First Commandment should be easy to obey. If there are no other gods but Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Moses, then it’s not possible to have any other gods, is it?

Well, even though we no longer acknowledge the existence of gods like Baal, Osiris, Zeus, or Neptune, there are still plenty of gods who vie for our allegiance and worship. In his explanation of the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther defines a “god” as anything we put our ultimate trust in. The modern pantheon of gods therefore includes things such as money, drugs, fame, athletic skill, beauty, the government, and our own sense of immortality.

A few years ago there was a very interesting article in *The Atlantic Monthly* (March, 1999) by Harvey Cox, a respected theologian and professor of religion at Harvard. Cox surmises that the most powerful god in America today, if not the world, is what he calls “The Market” (with a capital “M”). Traditionally, Christian theologians have described God as having the attributes of omnipotence (possessing all power), omniscience (having all knowledge), and omnipresence (existing everywhere). Cox shows how our culture has transferred these attributes to The Market God.

Divine omnipotence means the capacity to define what is real. The Market defines what is real by turning everything into a commodity which can be bought and sold. Land is a good example. For centuries, land has held various meanings, some of them quite spiritual: Mother Earth, holy mountain, tribal homeland, ancestral resting place. But in the religion of The Market, all of these complex meanings of land melt into one: real estate. At the right price, no land is not for sale. The same is true with water and air. The current controversy about whether or not the United States should sign the Kyoto agreement is basically about the financial value of clean water and air – are short-term profits worth more than long-term environmental goals? The Market God has omnipotence and defines what has real value.

The Market God is omniscient and knows all. Current thinking assigns to The Market a comprehensive wisdom that in the past only the gods have known. The Market, we are taught, is able to determine what human needs are, what copper and capital should cost, how much barbers and CEOs should be paid, and how much jet planes, running shoes, and hysterectomies should sell for. But how do we know the Market’s will?

In ancient times, the prophets of Israel announced what Yahweh’s will was, as Elijah did to Ahab. Today The Market’s fickle will is clarified by daily reports from Wall Street. I listen to WCCO Radio in the afternoons and the business reporter tells me that today The Market was “apprehensive” or “relieved” or “nervous” or even at times “jubilant”, as if The Market is a living thing that has feelings. A company doesn’t make its third quarter forecast and The Market is displeased and demands sacrifice, and another 500 people lose their jobs. Another company does better than expected and The Market determines that its CEO is worth \$30 million more than he was the day before. The Market knows all. On the basis of these revelations, people make critical decisions about whether to buy or sell stock. The high priests of The Market God (we call them economists) give their predictions or prophecies of The Market’s will, often with the same degree of effectiveness as the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

Cox notes that The Market God is also omnipresent. The latest trend in economic theory is the attempt to apply market calculations to areas that once appeared to be exempt, such as dating, family life, marital relations, and spirituality. The Market now has available for sale things like serenity and tranquillity, says Cox. “Your personal vision quest can take place in unspoiled wildernesses that are pictured as virtually unreachable—except, presumably, by the other people who read the same catalogue. Furthermore, ecstasy and spirituality are now offered in a convenient generic form. Thus the Market makes available the religious benefits that once required prayer and fasting, without the awkwardness of denominational commitment or the tedious ascetic discipline that once limited their accessibility. All can now handily be bought without an unrealistic demand on one’s time, in a weekend workshop at a Caribbean resort with a sensitive psychological consultant replacing the crotchety retreat master.”

Cox concludes that The Market has become the most formidable rival to all the world's religions, largely because it is rarely recognized as a religion. For those of us who strive to fulfill the First Commandment and worship only the God of Abraham, Moses, and Elijah -- the God who is revealed most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ -- the temptation to put our ultimate trust in The Market God is as real as the temptation of the ancient Israelites to worship Baal.

To counter that temptation, we make these affirmations:

- **The Market does not define our value as persons.** The LORD God created us in God's image and we are valuable because we belong to God, not because of what The Market says.
- **The Market does not define the value of the environment.** The environment is to be cared for and protected because it belongs to the LORD God, and we are the stewards to whom God has entrusted its care.
- **The Market does not give meaning to life.** If we trust in the Market God, we will find it to be like building a house on sand -- it will stand for awhile, but when the storms of life come it will get battered and fall down. There is only one solid, secure foundation on which to build a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives. There is only one rock that will stay firm under our feet and withstand the storms of life: The LORD God -- Yahweh--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That's Elijah's message for us today. Remember the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods.