

## **MOUNT CARMEL SHOWDOWN (1 Kings 18:20–39)**

Pastor Hubert Den Draak, Pinegrove, June 3/13

Some people say the Bible is for sissies, with babies in a manger, singing angels, love and peace, warm fuzzies everywhere. Well, next time you meet someone like that, tell 'em this story of Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel. This is heavy duty "guy stuff". I mean, this must have been what guys did before there was the World Wrestling Federation or Monster Trucks. It's a rowdy show of one-upmanship, with the central contest being the age-old "My god can beat the pants off of your god" contest. Or at least - that's what it *seems* to be about.

But before going into that, there are some things you should know about the story. First are the main characters. Elijah is a prophet who lived 900 years BC, and was one the most colourful of the Biblical prophets. He's credited with lots of miracles, including parting the waters and raising people from the dead. And instead of dying like all the other prophets, the story goes that a fiery chariot came down to get him and Elijah simply rode off into heaven in the chariot.

Because of all that, the expectation grew that he would come back some day to usher in the final age of the world, God's kingdom. That's why, at Passover, Jews always have a special chair and a cup ready for Elijah.. for this year just might be the year of his return. You may remember that passage in Luke where Jesus asks his disciples who people think he is. And Peter answers, some people think you are Elijah who has returned. So Elijah is a big deal in the bible.

During much of Elijah's life, he fought with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel because they ruled Israel, but worshiped other gods, the god Baal in particular. Now Elijah's name means "God is God," and that was exactly his message: *God* is God. He yelled and raged and did all he could to bring down king Ahab and queen Jezebel because they were leading the people away from the one true God, the God of the covenant with the people of Israel.

Now mind you, it's not that Ahab and Jezebel weren't particularly bad rulers; they brought relative prosperity and peace, so nobody felt like switching back to the God of the Covenant. After all, things were going pretty good, so if it ain't broke, why fix it?

But then the country experienced a horrific drought, with people and cattle dying everywhere; and no matter how much they prayed to Baal and their other gods, the rains just would not come...

So Elijah sees this as an opportunity to call the bluff of the powerful prophets of Baal. "Your gods don't even exist", he taunts them, "they are dangerous figments of your imagination! There's only one true God: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the covenant, the God who cares. So let's settle this once and for all; let's see which God actually cares if we pray for a sign."

The next scene seems straight from a Cecil B. DeMille movie: we're on top of mount Camel with - not dozens, but hundreds of prophets of Baal yelling and dancing wildly around their altar, hour after hour, the sun beating down on them all day long... crying out to Baal, mutilating themselves to show their devotion. And while they do that, Elijah just sits back and laughs at them, he pokes fun at them. Imagine: the story says there are 450 prophets of Baal - and just one single prophet of the God of Israel, Elijah. Clearly, the other priests run this show, but Elijah is not impressed and even yells, "is that the best you can do? Come on, you can do better than that!"

Then his turn comes and he spices it up for the cameras. Just bringing down fire is not enough... he's got to make the wood and the sacrifice un-burnable by drenching it with so much water that the excess water fills a trench he has dug around the outside. Where was Reality TV when we needed it, right? It's like the stunts by Houdini and others who enjoyed putting themselves in impossible situations and then getting out of it, with the crowds going oohhs and aahhs. Also don't forget, this was during a serious drought, when water is extremely precious. And here is Elijah, pouring it on like there's no tomorrow, demonstrating his trust in the God who will provide.

Once the stage is set and the crowd has been gearing up all day, Elijah quietly and modestly (not loud and wild like Baal's prophets) prays to God and gets instant results. *Kablaam...!* Fire falls from heaven. And not just any fire: it burns up the sacrifice, and the wood, and the rocks, and the dirt, and even the water in the trench. Makes you think that God had as much fun with this as Elijah did, doesn't it?

If we step back from this story and look at it from a bit of a distance, we can see how it paints us a subtle picture of human nature, and I believe it is in the bible because we are meant to learn from it. This is not just about Elijah and the prophets of Baal, it's also about us. The story shows our love of spectacle and big shows. It shows our love for underdog-heroes who make it to the top. And when they win, we hardly ever settle for just a simple victory. We embellish and we add to the story, just to be sure that everybody knows that we are the winners and the others are the losers.

And we do not often treat the losers with grace. In fact, the story continues with Elijah instead of going 'round shaking hands or high-fiving everyone, he rounds up all the prophets of Baal - and slaughters them. It bet they never told that in Sunday school, did they? This is cold blooded revenge, and God never told him to do that. It's a painful reminder that prophets are human too, no saints.

This story also reflects our thinking that simplistic contests or violent confrontations would solve things. As if beating the other guy down or humiliating your opponent actually solves anything. Even Elijah has that mindset, first humiliating his opponents - and then when they're down, killing them.

Of course we shouldn't forget that this was 3000 years ago, in more primitive times when it didn't occur to people that there might be other ways to settle a disagreement. So try and look through the rough exterior to see the diamond at the core here.

At the core of this story is a timeless challenge; the challenge is: which altar we will claim for ourselves? Just who is it we call on to save us when push comes to shove?

We like to think that because we come to church and call ourselves Christians that we will automatically find ourselves at God's altar, rubbing elbows with Elijah. We would never worship a false god... how silly! And yet... we do it all the time.

Some of us call to the god of possessions, stuff. As soon as I can afford a house in a better neighbourhood or a more reliable car, things will get better. If I got a raise, I wouldn't be in this mess. If I could buy that dishwasher, we wouldn't argue so much. We bleed ourselves with constant *work*, trusting that if we just work a little more and make just a bit more money, we can buy our way out of our problems, we can buy happiness. We hardly ever stop to smell God's roses. When we trust in possessions and money to make our lives better, we are only calling to Baal.

Still others do what people did 3000 years ago, when we're disappointed in a god who doesn't live up to our expectations: we demand a sign. We challenge god and say, just show me what to do or help me, and then I'll believe in you. I'll go to church every Sunday, and heck, if you really fix my problems, I'll even give the church a big donation - *and* quit smoking. A pay-as-you-go kinda god.

Another Baal is the god of false security, a god who is worshipped a lot these days. The false security of a job you don't like, but you need it to pay the mortgage - and your bank loans (for buying all that stuff). The god of false security who tells us it's okay to have faith in weapons, in armies, to wage war if we feel threatened. Because everyone who is not like us is probably a terrorist. The god who tells us not to *welcome* strangers, but to fear them; to label refugees as freeloaders who are only out to abuse our social system.

We worship many false gods, and the funny thing is we're often not even aware of it. And in the midst of it all stands Elijah... watching us, making fun of our silly expectations. Maybe, if we were paying attention, we could rewrite the story of Mt. Carmel. Maybe God has given us this story so that we can learn... so that we don't need to beat ourselves up all our lives - for nothing.

What if - what if we stopped all the madness, quit calling out to the Baals of our lives, and joined Elijah at the altar of the God of the covenant who says: trust me. I'm there for you if you are there for me. We're in this *together*.

The Bible tells us again and again that no matter how impossible it seems, no matter how wet the wood, so to speak, God's fire can still blaze in our lives the moment we ask and are open for it.

There's a catch, though... there's always a catch, isn't there? The catch is we can't have it both ways; we have to be willing to leave the other gods behind. And that takes courage; it's not easy to do in a world that tells us every day it's okay to worship those gods. If you ever find yourself in that situation, just think of Elijah, and think of what his name means: *God* - is God. There is no other. That is at the core of this story. The fire-coming-down adds a nice dramatic flourish, but is not the point. The point is: which altar, which god do we choose?

A long, long time ago an imperfect, drama-loving prophet proved this point on top of a mountain. That story now reaches to us across the ages, inviting us to join that prophet and to give up the silly dance around the altar of Baal. God is waiting patiently to put us on fire, Pentecost fire; waiting for us to just ask - and take a chance. Amen.