“Dueling Gods”

1 Kings 18:20-39

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November 8, 2015

Our text for today is a grand saga. Like the parting of the Red Sea, Jonah and the big fish, Daniel in the lion’s den. This is one of those stories that stops us in our tracks and gets embedded in our memories.

Like every grand saga we need to hear a bit of the back story. Last week we heard about the division of the kingdom. When the north and the south went separate ways. The Southern tribes of Judah would eventually fizzle out. 10 of the 12 original tribes just sort of fall of the map of history. But the remnant of Israel, those two tribes in the north, would manage to survive through the centuries. Their first king was Jeroboam – the guy who made those two golden calves we heard about last week. He was just the start of a long line of bad kings. Kings who would lead the people astray. 6 kings after Jeroboam, the people were led by Ahab, a king who did even more evil than his predecessors. One of his notable decisions was marrying Jezebel, that famous leading lady in the Biblical narrative. She got him hooked on worshipping Baal. This made God fiercely angry. God sent a drought to the land. And the people suffered for years. But, not wanting to give up on them entirely, God sent Elijah the prophet to advise Ahab on his wrongdoing. Elijah is the Jiminy Cricket trying to keep the king in line and draw him away from his evil ways. Elijah goes to Ahab and tells him to gather all the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Elijah set out to prove which god was worthy and which god was worthless.

Because this is a longer text, I’ve invited a few folks to help with this reading today. Let us continue to listen for the Word of God in 1 Kings:

**1 Kings 18:20-39 (NRSV)**

Narrator: So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah 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.

Pastoral Pause…

Like any good saga, our text paints a clear picture that this is a story of good vs. evil. It’s right up there with Darth Vadar vs Luke Skywalker. Robin Hood Vs the Sherrif of Nottingham. Or my favorite as a child, Ariel the Little Mermaid vs Ursula.

In this battle between good and evil, Elijah challenges the people to pick a side. Will they worship Baal or will they return to God? Elijah puts the dueling gods to a test. To show the people who the true God really is.

Let’s continue to listen to our story…

Narrator: Then Elijah said to the people,

Elijah: "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."

Narrator: All the people answered,

The people: "Well spoken!"

Narrator: Then 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: So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying,

The People: "O Baal, answer us!"

Narrator: But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At 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: 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.

Pastoral Pause…

So here we have this test. The gods are placed on stage and given the chance to prove their might. Two bulls are given to be burnt offerings. But the people are instructed not to set fire to them. Instead, they must wait and see which god will respond. Which god will have the power and might to set their bull on fire. The people trust that Baal will live up to his name. They wait and hope for him to prove his power. And then they wait some more. And some more. They cry out to Baal. Elijah starts to taunt them a bit. Sarcastically wondering where Baal is. Has he gotten lost on his way here? Did he wander off? Is he sleeping? It seems he is nowhere to be found. The people cry out even louder, hoping Baal will hear. They even start to cut themselves, an act of self-harm that was meant to get their god’s attention. But Baal was nowhere in sight. Half a day passes and Baal’s offering remains unlit.

Let’s find out what happens next…

Narrator: Then 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; 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,

Elijah: "Israel shall be your name";

Narrator: 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,

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

Narrator: Then 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, so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

Pastoral Pause…

Having given Baal plenty of time to respond, Elijah declares it is now Yahweh’s turn. He builds up the altar, invoking the memory of the 12 tribes of Israel. Helping the people to remember their roots and think back to their ancestors. The ones who were faithful to God. The ones who thrived thanks to their trust in God.

With the altar built, Elijah wants to really prove God’s power and ability. He tells the people to dump a bunch of water on it. That wasn’t enough, so Elijah tells then to do it a second time. No, still not wet enough. A third time, he says. Make sure that altar is soaked through and through. He wants to make sure there’s no chance of this altar being set on fire by any means other than God.

We continue our story…

Narrator: At 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. 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."

Narrator: 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 people: "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."

Pastoral Pause…

The seemingly impossible has happened. That soaked to the bone altar is set aflame. Even the water around it burns. Logic has been defied. Not by some random act. This wasn’t a magic trick. This was God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel. The God who had been faithful in the past remains so, even when the people strayed away. Even when they turned their hearts toward Baal, Yahweh’s heart remained faithful to the people.

In this test between the dueling gods, the odds were stacked in favor of Baal. Baal had 450 prophets on his side, while Yahweh just had one. Baal’s altar was left dry, ideal conditions for a fire. God’s was soaked thoroughly. No one thought it could be set on fire. Baal had thousands of adoring fans chanting for him. Yahweh had only Elijah.

And yet in this story of good vs evil, the villain didn’t stand a chance. All that faith the people had stored up in Baal was diminished when he was put to the test. When he couldn’t compete against, Yahweh, the one and only God worthy of worship and devotion.

When God set that altar on fire, the people believed. They saw God’s power and might, and they declared that the Lord, Yahweh, is God. Once again, though the moment was brief, they believed in God.

But this story is more than just a fight between competing gods. It’s more than just a power struggle. When Elijah builds that altar and recalls those 12 tribes, he’s reminding the people of their story. He’s reminding them of their heritage and what their ancestors went through. Elijah helps them remember that God has been faithful to them all along. Even when they haven’t been faithful.

As we reflect on this epic saga from Israel’s history, we can’t tell ourselves that this is just neat story from the past. Because this is our story too. We relive this story almost daily when other gods attempt to take our attention away from the Lord God.

Baal is long gone. He was a god whose time was short lived in history. But other gods have taken his place. Other gods continue to demand our devotion and often succeed in doing so.

There’s the money god. A god which demands our devotion and worship. Whether we store that money away to keep all to ourselves, or spend that money extravagantly to show others how much we have.

There’s also the god of power and status. We idolize our power and strive for a status which will impress others. We want so very much to rise to the top, looking down at others who haven’t managed to succeed as we have.

We worship the god of vanity. Obsessing over our appearance, wanting to have that wrinkle free skin. Or bright white teeth. Or skinny waist and flat tummies.

We worship the god of lust. This one is made almost too easy with the plethora of pornography websites available to browse. Or phone apps which facilitate one night stands with a stranger.

There are gods all around us that demand our worship and steal our attention. While they may offer short term happiness, they will always disappoint. When put to the test, they will always fail. Like Baal, they might be enticing for a while, but their comfort and gifts will only last a short time. These gods don’t offer sustainable joy.

But there is a God who does offer sustainable joy. There is one true God who will never fail us. Will never let us down. There might be times when we think God is absent. Just like those Israelites thought God was absent during the time of the wicked kings. But God is always there. Even when we don’t recognize God’s presence. God is always waiting for us to return our devotion.

Hopefully it doesn’t require a fiery scene like this one on Mount Carmel. Where Elijah challenged Baal to a duel. Hopefully we don’t need such a dramatic encounter to remember God’s power and presence and faithfulness.

Because there are plenty of opportunities for us to see God show up. They happen every day.

Like when we feel the warmth of the sun, faithfully arising each morning. Reminding us that God has created each day. Or when we experience the amazing gift of love. Reminding us that God is behind all of our relationships and love-filled connections with others. Or when we crawl into bed each night, having been given the gift of another day. Reminding us that God is there each and every day. Faithfully present with us. These subtle reminders let us know that God is there.

And then of course, there’s that grand, sweeping gesture God made. The one which showed us that God indeed loves the whole world. That gesture is Jesus Christ. God’s son. God incarnate. We hold on to this truth that God came to the earth in flesh to be one with us. To be ever present, ever faithful. This is a gesture more awesome than even that duel between gods on Mount Carmel. It is a gesture which reminds us that the Lord is indeed God, at the center of it all. Amen.