

# No CONTEST

## Sermon, June 19, 2016

### Text: I Kings 18:17-39

Last week we began looking at Elijah, who lived in the ninth century B.C. and was called by God at a critical period of Israel's national life. As mentioned last time, the little nation of Israel seemed to be doing OK ... there was a degree of political stability and it was economically sound; spiritually and morally, however, things were going from bad to worse. King Omri, the father of King Ahab, had initiated a policy of trade and friendly relations with the Canaanite people of Phoenicia (*located north of Israel along the Mediterranean*). Now, historians tell us that Canaanite religion was the one of the more depraved of the ancient world's religions. Baal, the most prominent god in the Canaanite pantheon of gods, was the god of fertility (*actually, the name Baal is kind of a generic name or title for many of the Canaanite "gods;" this particular Baal was also known as Hadad ... which, I guess, makes this appropriate for Father's Day ... my children often called out "Hey Dad" as they were being raised*). In the Ugaritic literature of the time, it was believed Baal Hadad often descended to the underworld to tangle with the god Mot, who was the god of applesauce .... sorry, couldn't resist that. Actually, Mot was the god of death. Hadad, being the god of fertility and life, would often have to take on the god of death in these mythological dramas and cycles. If you remember the 1998 Anthony Hopkins and Brad Pitt movie filmed up here at the Aldrich Mansion, "Meet Joe Black," well, Mot was more or less the Joe Black of the Phoenician pantheon (*not to be confused with John Black, that's our music director*).



So when Baal was away dealing with Joe Black Mot, it would be necessary for the people to "call him up," to raise him from the underworld, if they desired to have Baal's blessing on crops, livestock, the weather, and so on. So, to call him up, orgiastic rituals involving temple prostitutes (*male and female*), bodily cutting and even child sacrifice were all ways of getting Baal's "attention" and were part and parcel of Baal worship. Archeologists have uncovered several houses in Palestine containing "foundation sacrifices" of infants; i.e., the bones of sacrificed children were found in the foundations of these ancient homes, children sacrificed to these false gods to ensure the home's safety and security. So-called foundation sacrifices of children (usually infants) were common as were fertility sacrifices, offering children as burnt offerings to ensure a good harvest. However spiritually and ethically depraved, the Canaanites in general and the Phoenicians in particular were *technologically* advanced. They were superior to the Israelites in many technical skills, such as masonry, the fashioning of metal for tools and weapons, and they were well advanced in seafaring. It was financially beneficial for the Israel to trade with this morally depraved and ruthlessly violent country. Spiritually and ethically, however, it proved disastrous.

As also mentioned last week, King Omri had arranged for his son Ahab to marry Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king; Ahab eventually succeeded Omri as king. Princess Jezebel brought quite a dowry with her to this marriage. She brought new trade agreements, new ports on the Mediterranean, political security, but she also brought her fanatical devotion to Baal Hadad. When Jezebel moved into the palace, Ahab granted her request to set up an altar and temple to Baal in the capital city of Samaria. He probably thought it was no a big deal; no need to conflict with his headstrong and temperamental wife over such a seemingly trivial thing as her religious preferences. Jezebel then proceeded to bring in some four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah (*Baal's feminine counterpart*) to make Israel a little more tolerant and pluralistic and accepting of other religions ... and she proceeded to carry out this religious pluralism campaign with deadly zeal.

Essentially, she used all the powers of government and her rather ruthless priest cohorts to have altars to God vandalized or torn down all over the country, and she began systematically establishing a kind of National Religion Reform Plan ... call it Jezebel Care. Those religious leaders who refused to participate in Jezebel Care were at first harassed and bullied by all the power of the government, and eventually they began to be murdered ... first, only a few at a time in what appeared to be "accidents," then it progressed to outright executions (*see I Kings 18:4, "While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves."*) The Baal and Asherah priests and prophets had much innocent blood on their hands, as Jezebel ruled the roost over her weak-willed, self-indulgent and conviction-less husband. It was at this point God intervened by sending in Elijah. As we read last week in I Kings 17:1, Elijah began by informing King Ahab there would be a drought, neither dew nor rain would come ... and as Baal Hadad was supposed to be the god who would ensure that the rain would keep falling, this meant that God was publicly taking on Baal. Elijah then went into hiding for the next three years, and, sure enough, there was no rain in Israel during that entire time. Chapter 18 begins with God telling Elijah to inform Ahab the drought will soon end .... but first, there is going to be a showdown, a public contest, on Mt. Carmel.

Note the risk Elijah is taking ... he goes to Ahab alone, and he is about to challenge nearly one thousand pagan priests alone. He is putting his life on the line! If God doesn't come through, Elijah is a dead man. Elijah then issues the challenge (v. 19). He tells Ahab to assemble all the people of Israel, along with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, and gather them all at Mt. Carmel. Ahab

complied. Elijah then speaks to this crowd of thousands and asks, in so many words: *"How long will you people keep wavering between two opinions? Make up your minds! If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him!"* And the people replied, *"Why? Why should we have to decide which one is right and which one is wrong? Why do we have to make up our minds? All religions are basically the same, aren't they? Who are we to decide which one is right? Can't I just worship God on Sunday and Baal during the week? What difference does it make? Can't we all just get along? Live and let live?"* No, they didn't say that ... the text tells us there was no reply from the people. However, knowing human nature among even religious people, I'll bet many were thinking such things ... though it should be painfully obvious there are stark and real and substantive differences between these "religions" and the ways they are practiced and observed.

The word "wavering" is probably better translated as "limping;" the Hebrew term carries the connotation of being lame and stumbling back and forth, it implies people who don't seem to have the ability or the fortitude (or the conviction) to stand and walk in an upright manner. Such people have trouble standing for anything! Receiving no reply, Elijah offers the challenge: *"Now, bring two bulls here. Let the prophets of Baal sacrifice one and place its parts on the wood, and let me sacrifice the other and place its parts on another pile of wood. Let them call on their God, and I'll call on my God, and the one who answers by fire -- He is God."* Pardon my vernacular, but Elijah is literally and figuratively saying to everyone, *"OK, people, let's cut the bull. Let's settle this."* The people readily agreed to the contest; the prophets of Baal went first.

This is really one of the more dramatic and, frankly, entertaining stories of the entire Old and New Testaments. From morning to noon the prophets of Baal tried to get their god's attention (v. 26). They danced, they prayed, they wailed, but no response. Around noon this gutsy prophet Elijah began to taunt them (v. 27), *"Shout louder! Surely he is a God! Perhaps he's off meditating, or he's busy, or he's traveling somewhere."* Actually, where our pew NIV Bibles have *"he's traveling somewhere,"* the RSV more literally translates the Hebrew as *"he's gone aside."* "Going aside" is an old Hebrew euphemism for going to the rest room! Elijah continues to taunt and goad and ridicule and heckle, *"Maybe your god is using the rest room! Or maybe he's taking a nap and you have to wake him up!"* The frustrated and desperate prophets prayed louder. They started cutting themselves, slashing themselves with swords and spears, as a desperate attempt to get some "divine" attention. Noontime came and went, and they continued their praying and wailing and dancing and cutting until the time of the Jewish evening sacrifice (v. 29). Nothing happened. No response from Baal.

Verse 30, Elijah quietly said to all the people, *"OK, come here to me."* He basically invited everyone to come sit in the front for a Time With the Prophet, and then he went about repairing the altar of twelve stones. We are told each one of these stones represented one of the twelve tribes of Israel, as if he was presenting an object lesson during the Time With The Prophet to say, *"Now look, people! Remember who you are! Remember your spiritual heritage! Remember your roots, and don't be so easily persuaded by new and different ideas of just Who is God!"*

He then dug a large trench around the rebuilt altar. He arranged the firewood, placed the pieces of the bull on the wood, and then said to the spectators (vv. 33-35), *"Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood. Get it good and soaking wet. In fact, do it again and again; three times in all!"* The water soaked the bull, the wood, the stones of the altar, and ran down and filled the entire trench. It's as if Elijah were saying, *"No tricks. There are no flammable pyrotechnics hidden below. Everything is thoroughly soaked."* Then, v. 36, Elijah prays one relatively brief but effective prayer (which is quite a contrast to the multiple prayers being prayed all day long to Baal). And does God answer. **WOOMP**, the fire of the Lord fell and burned up not only the bull, but it disintegrated and consumed the wood, the stones and the soil beneath the stones, evaporated all the water, leaving nothing but a deep, smoldering crater! When the people saw this "contest" was really no contest at all, they in effect pleaded "No Contest," or "nolo contendere"... it's not a perfect analogy, but "no contest" or "nolo contendere" is basically a legal plea by which defendants acknowledge guilt and accept conviction as though a guilty plea had been entered. No contest here. They readily acknowledged their fault by falling down on their faces and crying out, *"The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!"*

Elijah's question is a question that rings out through all the ages: *"How long will you go lamely limping between opinions?"* Elijah might say that there comes a point when God just gets tired of the "bull" in our lives and wants to blast it away! William Penn once wrote, *"Right is right, even if everyone is against it; and wrong is wrong even if everyone is for it."* Popularity doesn't determine reality and truth; neither do legislatures nor courts nor queens nor kings. God does. Elijah says to the Israelites, and He says to all of us: If God is God, then *follow Him*. Always. At all times. It's the right thing to do. As we just sang,

This is my Father's world. O let me never forget,  
that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."  
This is my father's world! Why should my heart be sad?  
The Lord is King, let the heavens ring. God *reigns*, let the earth be glad!

And as you read ahead, you'll see that the **reign-ing** God is about to **r-a-i-n** and put an end to this three year drought, thus underscoring what by now should already be clear ... The Lord, He really is God. Not Baal Hadad. We'll continue this story next time.