

## The Battle

1 Kings 18:1-8, 17-41

Mark 4:35-41

June 13, 2010

Third Sunday after Pentecost

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Last Sunday was the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, the united Allied Assault upon Europe on June 6, 1944 to reclaim it from Nazi German occupation. D-Day was the largest amphibious invasion of history, with 160,000 troops landing on the beaches of Normandy and 195,000 naval personnel in over 5,000 ships getting them there and providing support. D-Day marked the turning point in the Second World War. D-Day was the beginning of the end.

Elijah confronting the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel is like D-Day and the Iron Bowl rolled into one - the mother of all battles. It is a great turning point, the contest between Elijah and 450 prophets of the pagan god Baal to determine which is the real God, the Lord God Yahweh, or the Canaanite god, Baal. It is one of those decisive confrontations we find repeated a number of times through the Bible when world views clash, as a representative of the Lord God stands before a powerful authority of the state. Moses before Pharaoh, David before Saul, Nathan before David, Jesus before Pilate, Paul before Agrippa, and here – Elijah before Ahab.

### I

When last we encountered Elijah, the prophet had gone into hiding from King Ahab in the foreign land of Sidon, Canaanite territory, after he had confronted Ahab and pronounced the Lord's word of judgment for his promotion of idol worship, a massive drought upon the land. In Sidon, Elijah had provided a poor widow with a continuous supply of oil and meal to make bread for the duration of the drought that God had sent upon all the world. Elijah also brought the widow's son back to life in another and even more dramatic demonstration of the Lord's power.

The drought has gone on for three years. Now it is time for Elijah to return before Ahab and pronounce its end. All the world has suffered these three years. We talk a lot and argue a lot about global warming. We know what a three year dry spell will do to our world. We anguish as day after day more oil spills into the Gulf; we are sickened seeing the oil-coated wildlife; we ponder the immense still largely unknown ecological ramifications. What a delicate balance we live in on this earth.

No water for three years had brought huge natural disaster upon the Middle East 800 years before the birth of Jesus. Ahab has even sent his servant Obadiah, who is loyal to both the King and the Lord and the Lord's servant Elijah, to find some green grass near a spring of water so some of the horses and mules can be kept alive. It has gotten that bad. Still Ahab has not gotten the message. He has continued to serve as patron for pagan gods, mostly to keep his Queen Jezebel happy and content. So Elijah sends

Obadiah his friend back to Ahab to let him know the Prophet is on his way - after three years, Elijah is coming.

A lot can change in three years. The three years prior to D-Day, saw the United States enter into the war and transform it. Three years ago, 2007, the economy was still looking pretty good. What were you doing then? Our daughter Catherine was graduating from high school. Our son Stuart was graduating from the College of Charleston, anticipating getting a job with a bank or stock brokerage firm. Not to be, as the economy cratered. No one was hiring. He did go to work for an insurance company for a couple of years, recently completed his MBA, and now this fall is beginning a graduate degree at UAB in Health Care and Hospital Administration. Three years ago he had not conceived of that now “exciting-to-him-and-his-parents” possibility.

Jesus’ entire ministry covers only three years. Those three years changed the world, especially three days of it. The Apostle Paul was knocked off his horse on the way to persecute Christians in Damascus. Encountered by the risen Christ, he becomes Jesus’ chief spokesman and developer across the Greek-Roman world. But for three years after that initial encounter Paul is sent off to Arabia, so we are told in Galatians 1, there to be prepared for the rest of his life’s ministry. These days seminary and law school, health care and hospital administration programs generally take three years. My point is, a lot of changes can come in our lives in three years.

Three years after the drought begins, Elijah returns to again confront the King. Thought of the encounter must have terrified Elijah. Yet God is with him. God is in him, and he is ready. Ahab greets him as “You troubler of Israel.” But Elijah makes it clear that “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...” Ahab agrees to this and all the people convene at the high mountain of Mt. Carmel.

## II

It is one of the most strikingly beautiful spots in Israel. One of the highest places in Israel, where on a clear day you can see from the Mediterranean Sea in the West to the Jordan River in the East. At Mt. Carmel, the King convenes the people of his land to watch a great battle, a great contest, between the two rival gods.

Elijah poses the question that is our question, “How long?” “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” Isn’t that the question we too must answer? We are not strong as we could be in our faith because we are on-again, off-again people. We have one foot planted in our faith and the other foot in, well you name it. We haven’t exactly followed the Baals. Oh, maybe we have a fat Buddha statue out in the garden just for decoration, but strange deities. Yet, we are divided in our loyalties.

I am glad we did not have to deal with the City of Birmingham the way Highlands United Methodist Church did some years ago with that fountain full of statues of frogs

and rabbits, and birds that the City built right in front of their church so that it looks like it is something the Church put out, when it is not. I know it is artistic, it is cute, it is pretty, you can sort of see a parable in it, but it is not exactly, well, Christian. I am glad we did not have to deal with that. We just have to deal lovingly with dance clubs and pubs and what – chick-filet, or let’s hope – Panera Bread, down our block. I don’t know how many of you were out there in one of those clubs dancing late on Saturday night before worship. If you were – fine. Actually if you were, you probably are limping, to be here today. But really so far as statues in Southside that make a witness go, the best one is that statue of Brother Brian on his knees beside the Mill Restaurant. You can be eating a salad or a poor boy sandwich and maybe downing a cool one and look over and be reminded of a great Christian pastor who spent most of his time not in the church, but praying with anyone and everyone out on the streets who would let him!

The people of God are limping feebly, that’s our problem. We find ourselves too distracted to focus on God and God’s claim on our lives, God’s word for our lives. When we hear God’s demand for utter loyalty to God and God’s teachings, and yet we hedge, and yet we say, well yes that is true but “on the other hand,” then we miss out on the power of the Gospel that is available to us. One minster notes,

“We unwittingly annihilate the Gospel because of how we arrange our day. We get up in the morning and we are busy and we rush from here to there and then have some discretionary time and maybe we watch a dumb movie or we have a trivial conversation. And then three years pass and we look up and we are 71 years old and we think, O my!”<sup>1</sup>

Limping between two opinions - how long have we done it? The children of our Vacation Bible School High Seas Expedition know about this. They are more up on their Bible these days than the rest of us. They have been focusing all week upon God’s Word and that fact that

- God’s Word is True.
- God’s Word is Comforting.
- God’s Word is Surprising.
- God’s Word is Life-Changing.
- God’s Word is for Everyone.

These children have been taught, and they came home teaching us that God is for real and means to be trusted and followed no matter what, so let’s go!

“How long will you go on limping with two different opinions?” If the Lord God Almighty, who revealed himself fully to us in his Son Jesus Christ, who could sleep soundly in a boat amid a storm and then arise and rebuke the wind, and say to the sea, “Peace! Be Still!” and have even the elements obey his voice; if this God is for real, then, let’s follow him. Let’s go. Let’s get on with it. Or if your bank account, or your hobby, or your job or your own image in the mirror is god, then follow that god, and see where it gets you.

But the people are silent. “The people did not answer Elijah a word.”<sup>ii</sup> The people are indifferent. The people are scared, frankly.

### III

So this contest to determine the true God is proposed by Elijah. Two bulls are to be slaughtered and laid upon an altar, surrounded by wood. Each side will call upon the name of their god, and the god that answers by fire is God indeed. “All the people answered, ‘Well Spoken.’”<sup>iii</sup> A moment ago they were silent. Now with the games about to begin they cheer the show. “Well spoken indeed!”

The 450 prophets of Baal go first. They pray and cry out furiously all morning long, “‘O Baal, answer us!’ But there was no voice, and no answer.” Baal turns out to be a big fat zero. Nothing but a figment of their imagination. At noon Elijah mocks them, “Cry louder! 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. Cry louder! The Living Bible captures the mocking tone of Elijah’s taunt in its crude paraphrase, “Perhaps he is talking to someone, or is out sitting on the toilet.” The prophets rant and rave and cut themselves with knives until blood gushes out. They put on quite a show! This is good stuff! High drama! “But there was no voice, no answer, and no response.”

A lot of popular religion is like that, and not just the pagan variety. Some of what goes under the label of Christian is not so different, with wooing promises of health, wealth and prosperity, a great show is put on if we simply follow this personality or that. But God does not respond because God is not in it.

But then it is Elijah’s turn. He builds his altar, prepares his bull, lays out his wood and then, for extra dramatic effect, even digs a trench around the altar and fills it with water. Three times they douse the altar and the bull carcass with water. Then Elijah prays, “Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel send a sign, and convince the people, and turn their hearts around. Instantly, the fire of the Lord sweeps down and consumes the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, the dust, and even licks up the water that was in the trench for good measure. Indeed, the Letter to the Hebrews gets it right, “Our God is a consuming fire.”

### IV

In Victor Hugo’s classic novel, Les Miserables, he writes about why Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo, saying,

“Was it possible for Napoleon to win the battle? We answer in the negative. Why? On account of Wellington, on account of Blucher? No; on account of God... When the earth is suffering from an excessive burden, there are mysterious groans from the shadow, which the abyss hears. Napoleon had been denounced in infinitude, and his fall was decided. He had angered God.”<sup>iv</sup>

The conclusion of the dramatic contest brings a massive conversion of these same people who previously “did not answer him a word,” At last, they answer. At last, they

are convinced. When they see the fire come down and lap up the offering they fall on their faces and cry out acknowledging the true God, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.”

At last these people, so fickle, lose their limp, fall on their faces, and find their faith. Their weak knees and unsteady ankles are strengthened as they bow low. Things do not go so well for the 450 prophets of Baal. But the real miracle is what comes next – life giving rain. The Lord God sends rushing rain after three years of drought. “There is a sound of rushing rain... the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain.”<sup>v</sup>

Peter Marshall preached on this story once, and offered this dramatic conclusion, “If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal then follow him... and go to hell” That is the choice before us. Either – Or. Either - follow the Lord wholeheartedly, with both feet, leaning into the wind of his Spirit, this is life-giving – Or – “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” Jesus said you cannot have it both ways. “If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”<sup>vi</sup> “No one can serve two masters.”<sup>vii</sup>

Three years- it is a long time to be without water. Three years- it is long enough to learn some things and make some changes. Don’t you want to do that? Where will you be, what will you be doing three years from now? Most of us really have not a clue. Oh we may be hoping to be in the same house, or a different house, the same job or a different job, to be through with school and off to a fantastic career in an economy newly, we hope, will be revitalized. These things we hope for perhaps, but we do not know. Three years – it comes so quickly.

But what we can know assuredly is that three years from now we do not have to continue to limp. We can walk spiritually with strength of heart and sureness of purpose, whatever we may face physically. “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”<sup>viii</sup>

These parents [Tish and Jermy; Kim and Jeff] who present their children, Owen and Connor for baptism today have made bold affirmations,

-“Do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?”

-“Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?”

This turning from and this turning to they have promised to do. And we have joined in that promise and that work with them. No more limping. No more hopping on one foot after some political Ahab as if he were a god, nor limping after some, imported spiritual fad of the month the culture throws our way. Will you follow Jesus? Will you follow Jesus wholeheartedly your whole life long? Who is on the Lord’s side?

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- <sup>i</sup> James Howell, a sermon preached at Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, NC, 6-6-10.
- <sup>ii</sup> 1 Kings 18:21.
- <sup>iii</sup> 1 Kings 18:24
- <sup>iv</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Misérables, quoted by Harry Emerson Fosdick, Riverside Sermons, “God Talks to a Dictator”, p. 341.
- <sup>v</sup> 1 Kings 18:41,45.
- <sup>vi</sup> Mark 3:25.
- <sup>vii</sup> Matthew 6:24.
- <sup>viii</sup> Hebrews 12:12-13.