

It's showtime!!! A sermon preached on July 8, 2018 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: I KINGS 18:17-40
MATTHEW 6:7-15

Fast forward three years.

God's declaration through Elijah of 'no rain' upon the land inflicts terrible suffering in Israel.

Pastures wither.

Animals die

People groan in misery.

Yet there is still no evidence of repentance from King Ahab

The land is scoured for Elijah to locate him and force him to withdraw his curse.

In insane rage, Ahab's wife Jezebel carries out a ruthless slaughter of the prophets of God.

Still though,

There is no sigh of rain.

The sun rises and descends through a cloudless sky

There is no relief!!

In time the two actors – Elijah and Ahab meet.

Ahab to Elijah **Is it you, you troubler of Israel?**

Interesting descriptive term – TROUBLER!

Probably loses some of the deeper meaning and sentiment in English

Elijah's blunt reply DON'T BLAME ME FOR WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

God has brought this drought of judgement because of people like YOU

YOU ARE THE REASON we have not seen rain.

God has restrained the heavens because you have broken His commandments

YOU have forsaken Him.

You have pulled your people into worshipping idols

Ahab needs to know that *the God of heaven is supreme* – so it's SHOWTIME.

A contest between Ahab and Elijah – but on a wider frame – a *showdown between idolatry and the living Lord*.

Elijah's plan is quite simple and straightforward

On the top of Mount Carmel, assemble the cut pieces of two bulls for sacrifice.

The priests of Baal and the prophets of Asherah are to prepare their bull on an altar, but not to light a fire under it.

Elijah will prepare the other bull, lay it on an altar he will construct but he too will not light a fire under the altar

You priests of Baal and prophets of Asherah will call upon Baal

I Elijah will call upon the name of the Lord.
 The one who lights up their respective altar with
 the fire of heaven – that is the true god!

I wonder...how many of the priests
 thought – easy/peasy – Baal is among other things,
 a fire god....

So the contest begins

The priests and prophets cry incessantly and louder
 and louder – O Ball, answer us....SILENCE – NO
 FIRE!!

The crying is added to by dancing around the altar,
 faster and faster

Then later in the day, as was their custom – there
 was self-mutilation by the priests!

Screaming, pleading, dancing, and now blood
 flowing – what chaos...

Baal’s answer to the cries – no answer

Through all this Elijah has truanted the priest
 and prophets

**²⁷ 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.” [I Kings 18:27]**

Some Biblical commentators have read into the
 line – meditating and wandered away to mean that
 Baal must be in the celestial men’s room!

Can you picture it?

Elijah is standing over there, leaning against a tree

His arms crossed – watching the prophets of Baal
Jumping around and shouting like a pack of wild
animals!!

Elijah’s taunts would have added to the
franticness and fury of the scene
From morning to evening, the priest and prophets
call to their god – NO RESPONSE!

The crowds of people witnessing this
could not help but begin to wonder if this Baal was
really as almighty and powerful as his priests
taught.

Remember this is a people who are already
pandering to Baal worship, yet say they still
worship the Lord God of heaven and earth
Elijah challenges the people

**²¹ 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. (Ki.
18:21]**

Into the scene of exhausted, hoarse and bleeding
prophets steps Elijah.

Twelve stones to build the altar – symbolizing the
12 tribes of Israel

The symbolism would not be lost on the people.
Lots of water is then poured over the altar – so
much water that it not only soaks the sacrificial bull,

the sticks under it but also fills the trench around the altar

Drip, drip, drip....

Elijah's prayer is a simple one.

There is neither pleading nor screaming.

No frenzied cultic dance

No empty repetition of the same words uttered for hours...

Vs 36-37 – 63 words requesting that God prove to all that He alone is Lord.

The response – immediate and awesome – whoosh, bull, wood, water all gone in a fire from heaven

The people gathered do a 180 to follow God

The priests of Baal led down to the Kishon river valley where they are killed

The rain – real rain – comes upon the land!!!

I wonder what the fire of the Lord looks and sounds like.

I wonder what it was like to be on Mount Carmel that day.

I wonder what went through the priests and the peoples' minds as Elijah stepped forth, builds the little altar, has water poured to soak not only the bull and the sticks but everything around them.

This is a scripture story that is spectacular and as such an initial temptation might be to dismiss it as merely a good bit of drama in the life of a Biblical

character – read nothing to do with you and me today.

Yet,

I believe if you set aside for a few moments its more spectacular elements, there is much this story calls and challenges God's people to remember and of which to be mindful today.

Divided allegiance between God and another is STILL WRONG – for in the end, it is God who will be compromised.

Divided allegiance is not a new issue in scripture.

In his final speech to the people moving into the

Promised land Joshua challenges and calls the

People to

Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” [Josh. 24:15]

The people affirm 3 xs – of course we will serve the Lord

Joshua further warns the people what shall happen if the people turn from God (vs.20)

Obviously, the people have short memories or attention spans,
 For Elijah issues the same call and challenge,
 As does the prophet Hosea
 The last book in the Bible – the Revelation – God speaking through St. John to the 7 churches in Asia Minor reserves his strongest words to the church at Laodicea.

15 “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. [Rev. 3:15]

Over and again, scripture and teachings and writings of the faithful say we cannot balance equally for very long the ways of the Lord and the world

The Lord’s ways, values and givens cannot be melded or moulded into the world’s ways, values and givens.

We are to as Jesus says live in the world, but we are not to allow our faith in the Risen Lord of the Church to be compromised by the world’s ways
 Difficult – you bet it is.

And we need stories like that of Joshua, Elijah and the vision of John to remind us that difficult or not, there is no option!!

There are consequences – eternal and temporal –if we think as people of faith we can compromise indefinitely with God.

The contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal is also a reminder that *a simple prayer of faith remains incredibly powerful!*

When Elijah steps forward – there are no theatrics, pleading, screaming or shouting.

There is no frenzied cultic dancing,

No empty repetition of the same words uttered for hours on end.

Elijah prays a simple 63 word prayer that God would prove to that entire HE, ALONE, IS LORD.

The priests of Baal believed the more cries and the louder the better Baal would answer quickly.

Same sort of blind spot of God’s people to whom Jesus addresses his counsel in this morning’s New Testament lesson.

7 “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. [Matthew 6:7-8]

Then Jesus leads into a sample prayer – what we come to know as the Lord’s Prayer.

There is a very fine line between earnest and heartfelt prayer

And heaping empty phrases prayer to God.

Observe as well Elijah's prayer was not a last resort.

Prayer was his first and in fact his only resort.

Prayer was the way he kept in touch with the

Living Lord

I believe God hears all our prayers, however articulate or full of grammatical and sentence structure mistakes they may be.

I believe when we pray something always happens – for God is here with us!

The key is – do we believe God is in control?

Do we believe He remains the God of the impossible?

Are each of us prepared to take our hope, our very lives on these things the way Elijah was and did?

For it is out of an affirmative and unconditional “yes” that prayers of faith, like Elijah's are prayed

The faithful – the truly faithful – says Jesus do not need to **heap up empty phrases** or use so many words when they prayer,

For they know God listens, hears, responds and welcomes our prayers....

A third reminder from this awesome and spectacular story of ShowTime between Elijah and the priests of Baal --*God remains in control!*

It might look as if God has been supplanted by Baal, But this is not the case.

God does not ultimately lose in the course of history – God’s word MAKES HISTORY HAPPEN. What may seem to the casual reader or hearer of this story as just a battle between two gods turns out to be a contest between God and an empty delusion.

Elijah is God’s servant in this story – not a wonder working hero

He offers prayer rather than the performing of miracles.

The acclamation at the climax of this part of Elijah’s story is not that Elijah is a ‘man of God’ but that Elijah is a servant of the One, true God.

Baal will not be the last empty delusion that will tickle the ears of the faithful in scripture, Make the faithful think they can worship and serve both the empty delusion and the living God.

Go through the scriptures and you will find the names of Moloch, Dagon, Anat, Asherah, Attar in the Old Testament,

The Greek and Roman empty delusions the early Christians faced.

The worship of science and progress in the 18th and 19th century,

The political empires Rome, Russia, France, Britain,
the 1000 Reich.

Cult leaders like Jim Jones.

However tempting their voices and their worldly
power in the end, they are all delusional,

All passing fancies

In opposition to the delusional and passing nature
of these and so other voices that would seek to pull
us away from the Living Lord of time and history
there resonate the words of Maltbie Babcock's

Victorian chestnut – 3rd verse

This is my Father's world:

Oh, let me ne'er forget

That though the wrong seems oft so strong,

God is the ruler yet.

This is my Father's world,

The battle is not done:

Jesus who died shall be satisfied,

And earth and Heav'n be one.

AMEN