

## ***“Dismissive, Distracted, or Devoted”***

Third Sermon in the Stewardship Series “I’m IN!” - “I’m IN-volved”

*1 Kings 18:17-39*

New Revised Standard Version

*\*This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermon moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

The narrative lectionary continues to invite us to experience the fickle nature of Israel’s faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Much like the tick tock of a clock, the back and forth of their devotion and loyalty is not unlike our own. Somewhere in the middle of this swinging between extremes - faithfulness and unfaithfulness - we hover, swaying with the rhythms (and whims) of our everyday lives. Where will our faith find us? Where will our loyalty to God land us today?

This is the exact place where Elijah finds his people. *“How long will you go limping with two different opinions?”* (v21) he asks, *“If the Lord is God, follow him; but if it’s Baal, then follow him.”* Get off the fence, he says. Pick a side. Stop swinging and swaying. Land *somewhere*.

Of course, Elijah knows good and well where he wants his

people to land, but he doesn’t just dictate to whom they will be loyal. Instead, he IN-volves them in the decision. He knows that for any kind of loyalty or faith to stick, it must be chosen freely, and not coerced. He gives power to the people; Elijah might have been the first Baptist, who knows?

So what’s led the Israelite people to this point to begin with? Hasn’t the Lord led the people out of the house of slavery, out of the land of Egypt, through the wilderness and into the promised land? Hasn’t the Lord provided for them, even giving them what they wanted in a King? Didn’t they remember that King David had brought the ark, aka “the presence of God,” into their midst in Jerusalem?

Yes, yes, and yes.

How is it, then, that they are wondering *whether or not* they

should worship the Lord their God?

Haven't their parents taught them the stories of their ancestors' faith? Don't they know all the trials and tribulations of their forefathers and foremothers that have brought them to where they are today? Isn't it obvious from the Ten Commandments that they should *only* worship the Lord their God?

*Well...you would think.*

But - it doesn't matter how much we've been told or how much faith has been passed down to us, until we experience something for ourselves - it doesn't make as big of an impact on us, does it? And this is especially the case when there are other options out there to consider.

Baal was another option.

We are in the time of King Ahab, around 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Last week, we saw how the once united monarchy under David got split into the North

and South. The story before us today is in the North.

King Ahab ruled the northern kingdom of Israel for 22 years (ca 874 – 853 BCE). And Ahab married a Phoenician princess named Jezebel, who brought her gods, including Baal, into the land of Israel. Promptly after their marriage, Ahab built a temple for Baal in Samaria (the capital) and erected an altar to Baal in the temple. Ahab broke the first commandment, *“you shall have no other gods before me, I alone am the Lord, your God.”*<sup>1</sup>

This has led the people astray, according to Elijah. And, in their defense, you can see how the people are confused because they're getting mixed messages from their king.

Enter Prophet Elijah. The prophet's role in the time of the kings was to keep the king in check, to make sure he stayed on track. The *king* was charged with seeing that the people were faithful to the covenantal law (i.e., the Ten Commandments) and the

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Lovelace, “Commentary on 1 Kings 18:20-39,” *Working Preacher: Narrative Lectionary* (8 Nov. 2015), accessed on 3 Nov. 2019 at

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2565](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2565).

*prophet* was responsible for keeping the king accountable to the law.<sup>2</sup> So, God sends Elijah to hold King Ahab accountable for promoting the worship of a foreign god.

And the whole situation is even *more* stressful because there's a famine in the land. In fact, the people of Israel are going on year three in this famine, and they are desperate for water, desperate for food.

Elijah announces that Ahab's worship of Baal has provoked God to cause a drought in the land (1 Kings 17:1). Not surprisingly, Ahab blames the drought on Elijah (1 Kings 18:17). (Still today, we are all too familiar with this "He said, he said / finger-pointing / blame-casting game, right?)

Now, you might interested to know two things about this drought and famine:

- 1) During the drought, King Ahab and his palace overseers collect grass for

the animals of the royal household (1 Kings 18:5), while others, such as the widow of Zarephath and the people living in Samaria, are literally starving to death.<sup>3</sup> He is using his wealth and power to serve himself, but not the people.

- 2) Strikingly, during this drought, no one (King Ahab included) seeks relief from Baal, who is the "rider of the clouds," the "god of storms and fertility." He was, quite literally, the "god of Thunder and Rain," and in ancient iconography he's depicted as carrying a lightening rod in one hand symbolizing fire and drums in the other, symbolizing thunder.<sup>4</sup>

If any "god" was going to stop the drought - it would be Baal, right? And yet - here we are - three years into the famine; and people are desperate. The stakes couldn't be higher.

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<sup>2</sup> Lovelace, *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> Elna K. Solvang, "Commentary on 1 Kings 18:[17-19] 20-39," *Working Preacher: Narrative Lectionary* (3 Nov. 2019), accessed on 3 Nov. 2019 at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4215](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4215).

<sup>4</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Craig R. Koester, and Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Podcast #379 - Elijah at Mount Carmel," *Working Preacher: I Love to Tell the Story* (26 Oct. 2019), accessed on 3 Nov. 2019 at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1187](https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1187).

And as the people suffer, Ahab is blaming Elijah and Elijah is blaming Ahab (1 Kings 18:17-18). So what do you do when you can't agree on who's right and who's wrong? You have a showdown. (And no, this isn't a John Wayne Western, but I wouldn't blame you if you thought it was.)

This showdown at Mount Carmel is a very theatrical scene. Elijah instructs Ahab to assemble "all Israel," the prophets of Baal, and the prophets of Asherah at Mount Carmel. To make it even more dramatic, - Elijah gave *every* advantage to Ahab and the prophets of Baal.

First, it's homefield advantage for Baal; this contest is held at his home stadium, if you will - Mount Carmel, which had become a site of worship for Baal in the northern kingdom.

Second, Baal outnumbers the Lord God 450 to 1. 450 prophets versus 1 God. It doesn't matter if you're Michael Jordan, Mia Hamm, Muhammad Ali, LeBron James, Michael Phelps, Simone

Bile, Wayne Gretzky, Serena Williams, or Tom Brady - one versus 450 is not looking good for that one.

Third, Baal was, quite literally, the god of Thunder and Rain, and so in choosing "fire" to be the sign from above, essentially Elijah is giving Baal his weapon of choice - lightening/fire - to settle this dispute about which there really should be no dispute if Baal could just bring the rain at any time. (But that's beside the point now...clearly he hasn't come through on the water end of things - Elijah is now giving him a chance with fire.)

Fourth, the animal set to be sacrificed is a bull, which is the animal symbol of Baal.

And fifth, the prophets of Baal get to go first.<sup>5</sup>

Essentially Elijah says, okay Ahab and Baal...you get home field advantage, you get to have 449 more players than God, you get to use your favorite weapon, you get to have your mascot, and you get to go first.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

I'll just pause right here and say that *almost* always - homefield advantage is a huge asset. But did you watch the World Series the past couple of weeks?

As sportswriter Rodger Sherman said, *"The 2019 World Series set the record for having the most disappointed fans. Seven times, Astros and Nationals fans filled their respective ballparks. In Houston, each Astros run came with a blaring train horn to fill an opposing pitcher's head with noise; in Washington, Nats fans sang a horribly annoying children's song with enough vigor to destroy opposing players' wills. And yet the Nationals won the championship by becoming the first team ever to win four road games while losing all three of their home games. Seven games, seven unhappy parades of about 40,000 exiting fans who had paid hundreds or thousands of dollars to see their team make history. Of course, they did see their teams make history—just not in the*

*way they had paid all that money to see."*<sup>6</sup>

Because *"this was the first World Series in which all seven games were won by the road team, but that doesn't tell the whole story. It was the first best-of-seven series in any major American sport in which the road team won every game. In fact, this marked the first time in 1,420 best-of-seven MLB, NBA, or NHL postseason series that the road team even won the first six games—let alone the decisive Game 7."*<sup>7</sup>

*"In every sport, at every level, home teams win more often than they lose..."*<sup>8</sup> for all kinds of reasons (people have all different theories about "home field advantage.") So then, does this World Series prove that "home field advantage" isn't real? "No," Sherman says, *"it's just proof that we witnessed a sports miracle!"*<sup>9</sup>

Well, having just witnessed this miracle of the 2019 World Series, we might not be that worried for God or for Elijah,

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<sup>6</sup> Rodger Sherman, "The 2019 World Series Defied Everything We Know About Home-Field Advantage," *The Ringer* (31 Oct. 2019), accessed on Nov. 3, 2019 at <https://www.theringer.com/mlb->

[playoffs/2019/10/31/20942186/nationals-astros-world-series-home-field-advantage-history](https://www.theringer.com/mlb-playoffs/2019/10/31/20942186/nationals-astros-world-series-home-field-advantage-history).

<sup>7</sup> Sherman, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Sherman, *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> Sherman, *ibid*.

but of course, statistically - we should be! Elijah is giving Baal every opportunity to prove that he is god over and above the Lord God. And the people would have clearly known that. Elijah makes the whole "home field advantage" so over-the-top and obvious that people would have known that Baal is clearly gonna win this battle. Well - think again, right? "All bets are off" because this is a "2900+ years in advance" preview of the 2019 World Series: Baal loses on his home turf. Big time.

The prophets are calling on Baal from morning until noon, "*O Baal, answer us!*" But, we read, "*there was no voice, and no answer,*" (v 26). The prophets are limping around the altar, either from fatigue or trying to gain sympathy from Baal, and Elijah mocks them saying, "*Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away (in Hebrew this is a euphemism for he has gone off to relieve himself), or he is on a journey, or he has fallen asleep!*" (v27).<sup>10</sup>

The prophets keep crying out loud and even more, they begin to cut themselves with swords and lances - (implying quite grotesquely and tragically that Baal is a god that requires self-harm in order respond). The prophets keep this up all the way past midday and until dusk or the time of the offering of the oblation, the *minchah* (Hebrew), which means the time of the "loyalty offering," but the text says, "*There was no voice, no answer, and no response,*" (v 29).

Baal is a no show.

With Baal MIA, Elijah makes his move. And once again, he calls the people close - wanting to involve them in the actions of preparing the altar for the Lord. He wants them to be part of asking the Lord to answer them, so that they themselves have an experience of faithfulness from God to hold onto in the future.

So they prepare the altar, with the 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel (in other words, this is not just proof for the Northern Kingdom, this is

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<sup>10</sup> Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

proof for all of Israel), and Elijah helps the people go to extra measures to ensure that should fire come down - it's not a fluke. He has them dig big trenches around the altar and then pour four jugs of water on the altar wood and in the trenches - and they pour four jugs of water on a second time, then a third time. It was doused with water. Which wasn't easy to come by in this drought, mind you.

Then of course, Elijah calls on God, "*O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel* (notice he doesn't say Jacob, but rather uses the new name given to Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok - which means, "one who struggles or strives with God"), *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, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back,*" (v36-37).

Fire falls and consumes the offering and altar and everything around it. The showdown is over. God wins. Which really means, "the

*people* win." That's the point here - to remind the people of the power of their God, and of how God is at work in their lives. The people fall to their faces and confess, "*The Lord indeed is God,*" (v39).

The Lord's demonstration via Elijah is a powerful one. The Lord God wins in the opponent's stadium, with every disadvantage. The message is clear: no god or person or king or thing or statue or idol can hold a candle to the Lord God who is a God who saves, who delivers, who frees, who brings life. Time and time again, God is shows Godself to be the One who says, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3): my actions speak for myself. I show up. I am present. I respond. I am with you. Even when you stray or are unfaithful - *my* faith in *you* remains.

And, as Elijah emphasizes by using the name Israel instead of Jacob, faith in the Lord God doesn't have to be a faith without struggle. Struggle is fine. Struggle is part of faith. It's when we bail out on God altogether because we're struggling and turn to other gods around us that we think

can help us more - gods like money, stuff, alcohol, drugs, politicians, celebrities, sports, shopping, food, debt, cars, electronics - anything that helps us numb out from life - it's when we bail out on God because of these others gods, that we are in trouble.

You see, Elijah was a prophet in the midst of competing priorities and loyalties in his day. His people had other gods claiming their attention and energy.

We do too. We live in a world of competing loyalties and priorities, don't we?

Like the saints we remember today, Elijah calls to us from our past to remember who God is in the midst of our dismissiveness and distractedness. Elijah calls us back to devotion of God by inviting us to remember how God has acted in our past and to awaken us to how God is acting in our present.

Given that we, too, live in a world of competing loyalties that draw us away from our One True God,

- What are the ways in which we dismiss God too easily?
- What are the things and priorities that distract us from God too readily?
- And most importantly, What are those practices and people who help us become more devoted to God in our everyday lives more regularly?

I don't know about you, but I dismiss God when I fail to recognize that the good things in my life - the blessings - are from God and are not of my own doing or success. I dismiss God when I prefer to rely on my own self-serving wishes and desires to make my way in the world, instead of looking to God for guidance, for direction, for humility, for grace. I dismiss God when I fail to see the ways that I have sinned against others, either by what I have said, or what I have chosen not to say / by what I have done, or by what I have left undone.

And I don't know about you, but I am distracted from God by my busy schedule, by all the



“things” - which seem so urgent at the time - that take me away from the present moment and from the person in front of me who needs a listening ear or a compassionate touch or a helping hand. I am distracted from God when I fail to be involved in the work of God in the world - the work of loving, serving, and including. I get distracted by TV shows and games on my i-phone and professional goals and family needs and health concerns and even my own anxious thoughts - which can spiral in circles about a question or decision. It's so easy to be distracted.

And I don't know about you, but the people and things that help me become more devoted to God are...

- ...Those things that **IN-vite** me to remember that I am beloved and worthy - just as I am...scriptures and people who validate my 'being' and not my 'doing' - who help me know that the God I worship is not a God who wants self-harm, but rather health and wholeness of body, mind, and soul...

The people and things that help me become more devoted to God are...

- ...those things that **IN-spire** me to remember that God is God and I am not; the beauty and grandeur of creation, the melodies and harmonies of music, the creativity of art, the community of worship, the gifts of grace in communion - the bread and the cup...

The people and things that help me become more devoted to God are...

- ...Those things that **IN-volve** me in the work of God's kin-dom in the world - reading at Stedman Elementary, advocating for racial justice, listening to someone in need who walks through our doors and helping them get a bus pass and some food...

The people and things that help me become more devoted to God are...

- ...Those things which give me opportunity to **IN-vest** in

the work of God; to put my money where my mouth is; to reveal my priorities as focused first on the work of God in the world through Calvary, and secondarily on providing for my own needs (those always seem to get taken care). Nothing else that I do helps me realize that “God is God and I am not” more than giving my money to the work of God. It takes my good intentions and actually turns them into real, tangible impact - far beyond what I could ever do on my own.

Elijah helped his people be “*All IN!*” with the Lord God when they were dismissive of the power of God and distracted by the allure of Baal.

Our sign from God may not be fire coming down from on high, but I promise God is giving some kind of sign to us today. Perhaps even in the lives of these saints who we remember today...who help us realize that from dust we have all come and to dust we shall all return. What *really* matters in life? So much will wither and fade away, but our faith, our hope, our love, our gifts, our loyalty, our

devotion - those things will remain.

“*Who, indeed, is God?*” (vs39) the people ask? The One True God is not an idol because an idol can’t be in relationship with us. The One True God is a living, breathing person - Jesus Christ - the giver of life, the giver of the gifts of Bread and Cup, forgiveness and grace - the One who unites us as a communion of saints - past, present, and future. The One True God is the One who releases us from bondage: who leads us, frees us, saves us, delivers us - the God who brings us Life.

May we use this showdown at Mount Carmel as a reminder that yes, there will be times where we are dismissive of God because of our pride and success and yes, there will be times when we are distracted from God by competing priorities. But in the end, like these saints before us today, **will we remain faithful and loyal and to the One True God?** God merely asks for our singular devotion.

“*Are you IN?*”  
Amen.