

The Contest at Mt. Carmel

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, February 21st, 2010

“And Elijah came to all the people and said, ‘How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ But the people answered him not a word.” ~ 1 Kings 18:21

Sometimes the brutality of the Old Testament simply takes your breath away.

On one hand, our story today is a classic and wonderful account of the power of the Lord’s Word against the falsities that challenge it. On the other hand, notice the end of the story: –

“And Elijah said to (the people), ‘Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!’ So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon, and executed them there” (1 K. 18:40).

Just imagine. 450 prophets of Baal, one after another, personally killed by the prophet of the Lord, no doubt with a hand-held sword. It’s probably best not to dwell on this, as the Word itself dismisses it in one verse, but the fact alone is disturbing, and the mind fairly reels at how it may have been done.

And today, of course, we would be horrified – we ARE horrified – at the thought of ethnic or religious cleansing. We regard it as outrageous that any practitioners of one religion should be allowed to kill those of another – for no other reason than that they disagree on the teachings.

But this is, after all, only part of a bigger story, the main redeeming feature of which is that despite its cruelty and barbarism *it is a symbolic tale of deeply personal, spiritual significance*. In other words, the whole contest on Mt. Carmel speaks to the issues of inner conflict that take place in the minds and hearts of each one of us – not usually openly, as in the narrative, but secretly, privately, within the deepest reaches of our thought and will.

And our problem today is very simple: like the men of Israel who “answered not a word” when challenged about their wavering devotion to the Lord, we are inclined to accept almost any kind of spiritual thought in the name of tolerance and goodwill, even though some of it may in fact be very detrimental – to ourselves and others. We are loathe to judge and hesitant about our own convictions. We think, well, after all, who knows?! So we are left hoping for some big, dramatic sign that will resolve the issues for us.

And in the story, Elijah gives it to the people. He calls down fire from heaven that is so intense it not only burns up the sacrifice, it also consumes the very altar on which it was placed - wood, rocks, dust and all, including the water that was so generously poured over everything and left standing in the trench around it.

But what does this mean for us? Should we expect our spiritual questions to be answered by explosive miracles on the physical plane? Isn’t it obvious that this would compel belief and as a

practical matter hold our convictions on a fairly superficial level? Then, in that case, the first time something else went *wrong* in our lives (from our self-centered point of view) we would either blame God or turn back against Him. No, spiritual life is just that – spiritual, and so the answers to our spiritual questions will appear in a spiritual form, albeit one quite possibly *represented* by just the things we read about in 1st Kings today.

That said, let's look at the story in detail, and let's see what it means. On your printed orders of service you will notice the narrow strip at the right edge that lists some of the basic symbols, or correspondences, in the story. (This same strip has some suggestions for reflection and practice during the week on the other side, and it is perforated so that you can easily detach it.) Here, as before, you will see that Elijah the prophet represents the teachings of the Word, especially the literal sense of the Word, as it confronts the teachings that are in conflict with it. These other teachings are represented by the prophets of Baal, but of course Baal himself never appears because he really is just an idol, a figment of the imagination arising from the loves of self and the world. Remember, there are 450 of these guys and only one Elijah, which tells you something right away about the pressure we get from the loves of self and the world.

But the number, 450, is also symbolic, and refers in this case to the temptations involved on the deeper level. You see, the number, four, being a multiple of two, represents conjunction, that is, the joining together of two things as into a pair – like a married couple – and typically those two things are the complementary characteristics of goodness and truth. But when goodness flows in from the Lord and is met by falsity or misunderstanding instead of truth then you have resistance instead of conjunction and a state of temptation arises. The representation of this state is intensified whenever it is multiplied by other numbers, especially tens or hundreds. In addition, fifty, from the multiplication of five and ten, also represents a certain fulness based on the five fingers that hold “a handful.”

Thus what is portrayed in the story, both literally and figuratively, is a very deep state of temptation or doubt about what is true, and ultimately Who's in charge. So what happens?

Elijah summons Ahab and all the people to a mountain, specifically Mt. Carmel, a perfectly beautiful, gently sloping promontory on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, a place literally named for its fruitful vineyards, a classic representation of the spiritual church, that is, the church consisting of those whose love for the Lord is built on understanding and a good conscience. But a mountain in general represents an elevated spiritual state, in fact a state of love that lifts our spirits and gives us a whole new perspective on our troubles.

There Elijah calls for the sacrifice of two bulls, literally oxen or bullocks, one for Jehovah and one for Baal. Sacrifice on an altar is a form of worship, and the bullocks with their great size and strength represent our ability to do what is good in the external world – or at least in our outward intentions. (Just so, real worship, as we know, consists in living daily according to the Lord's Word; our worship *services* are simply meant to promote and confirm that life.) So in sacrificing these animals the people represented our own willingness to do good work for God's sake.

But who is God? Here's where it gets interesting. A lot of people say it is impossible to know God, and while this is not exactly true, there is a certain truth to it. He is, after all, infinite, and we are finite. We simply cannot draw a line around Him and say, “There! That is God.” But we

know that He is Divinely Human, and so the more we read and reflect on what we are taught about that – especially in the Gospels and the teachings of this church – the more we can understand and feel His presence. On the other hand, without that study and reflection we will certainly be left wondering – as the people of Israel in their ignorance wondered.

So in the story, Elijah first *sets up* the prophets of Baal. He lets them do whatever they wish to prepare their sacrifice and make something happen. But nothing happens. They leap around and cut themselves until the blood runs everywhere and they are exhausted, but nothing happens.

How often have WE danced around and *cut ourselves up* and tried with all our might to make something happen in OUR lives only to find that nothing really changes? How long does it take for us to see that we are getting nowhere? Noon represents the spiritual state of greatest heat and light, but when we act from self-love and self-intelligence this just represents the peak of frustration. And here Elijah begins to mock and taunt the prophets of Baal.

Now this is important: the Lord Himself never mocks anyone; He is all love and mercy, pity and forgiveness. But when we are in a state of intense commitment to ourselves and our own ideas it can seem to us as if God IS mocking us because we're not getting what we want.

You have to love the way Elijah puts it: – “Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened.” The Old King James is lovely: “...peradventure he is sleeping....”

Why doesn't God hear us when we call?! Isn't it always, really, because we are not truly calling on Him? Isn't it always, really, because we are so full of our own ideas and feelings that we have no room for the Word that the Lord so urgently wants to give us? Baal is an idol, a construct of our own self-centered, worldly thinking. We can sing and dance *and criticize ourselves* all day long and never get *anywhere* until we realize that we are simply barking up the wrong tree.

And so Elijah prepares HIS sacrifice. He begins by putting the wood in order. What is that? Well, as you see, wood signifies the good works that we can do, and to put the wood in order is to put our outward lives in order by doing that good. In fact, it is Elijah – the Word itself – that does this for us. Then he has the people pour water on the sacrifice, in fact, all over everything, not once or twice but three times, representing a full or complete process, with more to spare for the trench around it. And so the Lord asks US to approach Him with complete faith in the truths that He teaches. We can't change our own loves. We can't make that sacrifice burn from our own will power, but what we CAN do is pour out our commitment to the truth *in faith* so that the Lord is able to do HIS part, however improbable it may seem to us at the time.

And when we do, well, watch out! Something really awesome can happen.

In our story “the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces, and they said, ‘The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!’”

Now remember, the title, LORD, in the prophetic books almost always refers to Jehovah, and this name specifically represents the qualities of Divine goodness or love. But the title, God, refers to

the Divine truth or wisdom. So when the people all shout their confession of the Lord as God, what we understand in the spiritual sense is our own recognition of the Divine love in the wisdom of the Word, or, since the Lord Jesus Christ is the Word incarnate, the full Divinity of the Lord in His Human form.

“What?” you may say. What is this talk of love and wisdom when the very next thing that happens is the summary execution of 450 weak and helpless men who no doubt *thought* they had been doing the right thing (certainly, in any case, with King Ahab’s and Jezebel’s blessing)?

Well, again, the whole story is symbolic. No one has to die in order for us to obey the Lord, no one, that is, except the egotist or the self-indulgent we find within. But when the fire of Jehovah comes down and consumes Elijah’s sacrifice we can take this to mean that the love and power of the Lord can become so obvious to us, and so inwardly compelling that all the work we do as if of ourselves will be completely consumed by that love, leaving us in a state of deep humility and reverent awe.

Yes, it may seem literally that the sacrifice is simply destroyed, and so, that it is pointless for us even to try to do anything to please God. But that is only an appearance. The reality is that the consuming fire represents the Lord’s *acceptance of our efforts* and His power to refine or sanctify them by taking away our pride and pre-occupation with ourselves, our accomplishments, our suffering and so on, replacing all that with a full realization of *His* goodness, *His* truth and *His* Divine Providence in every aspect of life.

At that point the prophets of Baal become as useless as Baal himself and may be summarily dismissed. In the culture of the times it was necessary that they be killed, but the spiritual meaning of that execution is that all worship of ourselves and the world is completely eradicated by the Word of the Lord.

Oh yes, of course we will continue to think of ourselves, our needs, our suffering, our doubts and more. We will continue to be aware of our responsibilities to ourselves and others. We should, in fact, have a healthy sense of self-esteem, and we should exercise prudence, knowing that the Lord is with us. But we will not worship our own ideas. We will not try to get our blessings by calling on the idols of our times – perfect health, wit, beauty, economic prosperity, social security, and the like. Instead we will use all the means given to us by the Lord to honour Him by emulating Him, that is, by living in deep and genuine charity according to His Word for the sake of others outside of ourselves.

Amen.

Lessons: 1st Kings 18:1-46, selections
Children’s talk about the Contest at Mt. Carmel

Matthew 6:19-24 & Apocalypse Explained 409:7