



June 18, 2006

1 Kings 18:1,17-24
Choosing a God
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Today's scripture invites you to take your place with the people of Israel who have gathered on Mt. Carmel. There we stand in the presence of two imposing altars. Around one we see the 450 prophets of Baal. Standing by the other is Elijah, the lone prophet of the Lord. As we stare at these two altars, we realize that a contest is about to begin. It is a contest between the Lord and Baal—a contest that we have forced. These gods are competing for our hearts.

In each of our lives these two altars persevere. At the one we worship the transcendent God, our creator, who cannot be controlled and who mysteriously leads us through the drama of life. At the other altar we worship Baal who is far more manageable. Baal is not transcendent. No, he is a god we have shaped with our own hands and, thus, a god that we control. Best of all Baal makes no demands of us—only promises. (We have always preferred that in our gods.)

The first Baal was a Canaanite fertility god who promised to help the crops grow and to make the land bountiful for his worshipers. And unlike the Hebrew God Yahweh, Baal didn't require fidelity. It didn't bother Baal if you wanted to worship two gods or even 200. So the Hebrews tended to worship Baal as a supplemental god. They usually continued to come to the temple to worship Yahweh. But they also honored Baal as their auxiliary god—just in case.

You and I understand this, don't we? We, too, come to the temple on Sundays, and claim that we have but one God. But it is so hard to live a completely integrated life. How do we really make sense of the teachings of Jesus about love and grace in our highly competitive, cutthroat world? It isn't that any of us think that Jesus is wrong. No, we think he has the truth. We just don't know if the truth works in our society. For example, how long would any of us last out there if just keep turning the other cheek? So we wonder if maybe Baal has any alternative strategies for our enemies?

Suddenly the air is pierced by the voice of Elijah who screams at us: "How long will you go limping with two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him." Then the text tells us, "And the people did not answer him a word."

That silence is our confession. We were afraid of this. Elijah has exposed our implied polytheism with the gods of creed and pragmatism. But two gods cannot co-exist. Choices will have to be made. Spiritual renewal in a person's life always begins with a choice, a decision. And when we realize the serious implications of this decision, we can only stand before the altar of the Lord in silence.

The text will not allow us to speak up too quickly saying, "I don't know any Baal." We all have a favorite Baal or two, and we all limp between two different opinions about God. We both believe that God will be faithful, and we do not believe. Those two opinions are what makes room for Baal in our lives. Oh, we never renounce our Christianity. We just pick up a little auxiliary, supplemental, just-in-case, plan B, plan Baal.

On Sunday, we say we believe God is the Creator, but most of the week we live as if we have a different opinion. We look at the lives God has created and called good, and listen to the voices of Baal in advertisements and fashion magazines that dare to say we are not good enough. So we buy Baal's products. And we buy his fat little mythology that promises we can be anything we want to be. I'm not saying that we should not diet, exercise and be good stewards of our bodies. Of course we should, but Baal will constantly tempt you to do things that promise the illusion of a different life. Clearly, the Creator wants you to have the life you were given.

Another example: On Sunday, we say we believe Jesus Christ is the Savior, but we spend much of the week trying to be our own saviors. That is because we have grown weary waiting for God to be faithful. Some of us have suffered for years with broken bodies and broken hearts, loneliness and bad relationships. We don't doubt that God *could* deliver us. What we doubt is that he will. As a pastor, I've become convinced it isn't Jesus' power most people doubt. What we doubt is his memory. We doubt he will remember us. So, as if you were on your own, you knock yourself out before Baal's altar trying to make others happy with you and trying to fix other people's lives as if it were all up to you. But you are not anybody's savior, not even your own. Only Baal would make you believe that soul-depleting lie. And only your doubt about the true God would make you listen to Baal.

As Elijah said, we have two opinions about who is God. And so, we cannot run without being weary. We cannot walk without fainting. We just limp along. Don't you see? This contest between Baal and your God has come about by the mercy of the Lord who loves you too much to let you limp through life with Baal.

In front of all the people, Elijah sets the rules for this great contest. First, the prophets of Baal will prepare a sacrifice on their altar, then he will prepare a sacrifice on the altar of the Lord. They will call upon the name of their god, and he will call upon the name of his. The god who answers by fire, "He is God."

From morning until noon the prophets of Baal danced in front of their altar crying out, "O Baal, answer us!" With some irony, no doubt, Scripture claims "they began to limp about the altar they had made." By noon, Elijah was feeling pretty good about how this thing was going, so he starts to make a few jokes: "Cry louder. Maybe he wandered away. Maybe he's on a journey. Oh, I know: maybe he's asleep, and you better wake him up." The prophets of Baal did cry louder and they cut themselves and bled for their god. "But there was no voice, no answer, and no response." That is the problem with Baal. It does not matter how frantically you try to make it save it you, there will be no response from any god you have made for yourself.

By three o'clock, Elijah figures enough is enough. He prepares the altar of the Lord and lays a bull upon it. Just for dramatic effect, he douses the sacrifice with twelve great jars of water and then he prays, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, answer me. Answer me that this people may know that you are God and that you have turned their hearts back." After this, he stepped back and threw his arms up to heaven. Suddenly a bolt of fire shot down from the sky. The altar exploded into flames as the fire consumed the offering, the wood, the water, and even the stones. The text says, "When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord indeed is God. The Lord indeed is God.'" I guess so.

It must have been a very impressive sight. But frankly, I am even more impressed by what did not happen. Notice that the fire from the sky did not consume any of us idolaters.

When your favorite Baal fails to pull through for you, it is not because God is angry. When you don't get the promotion in spite of all your hard work, when you don't get your health back in spite of all your careful exercise, and when you just keep dating, but nothing remotely similar to fire falls from the sky, it is not because God is judging you. But sometimes Baal has to let you down before you can see that he is not God. According to Elijah's prayer, what God wants is not your judgment but just to get your heart back. Like any loving relationship, this one will never survive with two conflicting opinions. God is either faithful, or not faithful.

You may not always understand him. He may not always come when you call for him. His ways are clearly not our ways. But that is all just a part of what it means that God is God.

Benediction: *This week you will make a hundred different decisions. If you pay attention to any of them, it will be apparent at which altar you are standing. Amen.*