

“The Fight of Elijah”

Security, Peace and Fear – part #2

I Kings 18:16-39

Last week we began a new series on Security, Peace and Fear. It doesn't matter what time of year it is, it seems that people are always wrestling with anxiety. We worry about the coming winter, our jobs, our finances, our relationships, and so forth. What we need to remember is that God is for us. The Bible promises that our security is ultimately found in God alone.

Who remembers our memory verse from last week? James 5:17. It's OK if you don't know it by heart, but the gist of it is, Elijah was just like us; when he prayed, God answered. When we face anxiety and fear, we should remember that prayer is the antidote. Elijah's prayers were powerful. He trusted God during a major drought, which came upon the people because of King Ahab, who led the whole country to abandon God as their security and peace, and instead worship idols, specifically, the pagan god, Baal. If there was anyone who knew anxiety, it was Elijah.

Maybe we don't personally struggle with idolatry today, but I submit to you that any time we invest extraordinary amounts of time into something at the expense of our relationship with God, that is an idol. It can be sports, TV (guilty!), our bank accounts and investments, or even just our fears and anxieties themselves. When we focus on fear instead of faith, that becomes idolatry.

Elijah and his people did not have cable TV and 401K's in his time, but the Israelites definitely struggled with idolatry. Specifically, they just could not trust God alone. What if God failed to provide for them? They were all farmers. They needed rain. What if the rain never came? Let's read the first part of the story.

(Read I Kings 18:16-21)

The first lesson this scripture teaches us is that we often misplace the blame when we are responsible for our own situation. Ahab wants to blame Elijah. After all, Elijah prophesied the drought. But what the king misses is this: the drought is God's response to the evil done by the king and his people. They abandoned God, and so, in a tough-love kind of way, God withheld the rain. Elijah had told them, unless they turned back to God, the rain would not come.

It appears that the people do not know what to do. Elijah asks them, point blank, whom they would serve. "How long will you waffle between two gods? Pick one!" (See verse 21). It is poignant that the people make no reply. Even when faced with a decision, their apathy, or maybe their fear, is getting the better of them.

Why did they worship Baal, anyway? It appears that they were hedging their bets. Maybe Yahweh, God, controlled the rain; maybe he did not. If so, surely it would not hurt to worship the pagan god, Baal, too? When the rains did not come, they were desperate to pray to any god; it did not matter to them. But of course, it mattered deeply to God.

Let's read a little further. (I Kings 18:22-25)

Finally, the crowd reacts. Elijah offers up an unbeatable deal: low risk, high reward. Set up two altars, and whichever god lights the fire under it, wins. Elijah, by himself, challenges 450 prophets of Baal. Oh, and by the way, Baal is the god of the sun and thunderstorms. This is what you call "home-field advantage." I'm not a betting man, but if I was an early Israelite, I'm pretty sure I'd back the home team, Baal and his 450 prophets, not Elijah.

Let’s read on to see what game plan the prophets of Baal used. (I Kings 18:26-29)

I give them some credit. Dancing and shouting, with sincerity. These prophets were no slouches. They sincerely believed that Baal would answer them. And here is the second lesson this scripture teaches us. Just because we believe something sincerely, does not necessarily make it true. As wondrous as our God-given emotions are, sometimes, we just make mistakes. You. Me. All of us. Sincerity is nice, but we should look at things like scripture, reason, tradition, and experience, as our founder John Wesley taught. Even logic, experimentation, history, and observation will yield better results than pure sincerity and intention. I can sincerely believe that I can fly, but someone hold me back I try to jump off a bridge! We need to use all of our powers of discernment.

I love how Elijah taunts the false prophets. “Shout louder! Maybe Baal is sleeping.” Some commenters even suggest that Elijah indicated Baal was in the bathroom. When you gotta go, you gotta go! There is a great irony here: Baal’s prophets believed that in many ways, their god was like a human. Elijah is throwing their false religion back in their faces.

Baal’s prophets fail the test. And like any crowd, when the show is over, the people all turn away, pretty much not caring. Now they probably want to see Elijah fail. Maybe they will find a new god when this test is all over.

But God has other ideas. Let’s read again. (I Kings 18:30-35)

Notice a few things here. First, Elijah calls the people to him. He does not seem particularly mad anymore. If anything, I can feel compassion in his words. The people had their chance to follow Baal, and it amounted to nothing. Now he shows them what true worship looks like. With the people looking on, he repairs

the altar with twelve stones – one for each tribe – a reminder that God is a God of promises.

And then, to prove this is not a hoax, Elijah has them pour gallons and gallons of water over the whole altar. That is pretty bold. Not only do the people not expect God to show up, but now Elijah has made the job even more impossible.

This is interesting. Do we ever pour water on our prayers? I mean, do we ever believe in the impossible? I think sometimes we are like these Baal worshipers, hedging our bets, saying, “Look, God, if you do this such-and-such, great, but if not, here is my back-up plan.” Elijah had no back-up plan. He just had his faith in his God, and, despite the crowds, the faith and knowledge that he was doing the right thing.

So this is what Elijah prayed: (I Kings 18:36-37)

Notice how short and simple his prayer is. The false prophets jumped and shouted and danced for hours – all 450 of them! Yet Elijah simply lays out his plea: “God, you are God, and you are faithful. Vindicate me, and turn the hearts of the people back to you. Amen.”

Of course, God answers. This is my favorite part. (I Kings 18:38-39)

God sends fire down, not only to consume the sacrifice, but the wood, the stones, and literally the dirt around it. That is one hot fire, let me tell you. It is a miracle that the people were not also fried, if the stones melted in the heat. This dramatic display of power leaves only one response: they all fall on their faces and cry, “The Lord is God!” “Yahweh is God!”

Lightning is amazing. Someday, I think I would like to be near a lightning strike – you know, close enough to observe it, but not close enough to be harmed

by it. That would be awesome. The thing is, though, we forget how awesome God is. We think, I will trust God a little, but let me keep a backup plan in case God does not show up. We think, “God, I trust you, and I believe in you, but if something else important comes up and prevents me from worshiping you, well, I think you will understand.”

What do our actions say? “God, you’re second place.” And while I don’t believe God is going to curse us with a three-year drought, I do believe that we fail to see the “lightning” - the signs of wonder. We fail to experience the blessings of the God Almighty because we have not fully given our allegiance to him. The Lord is God! That means, sadly, that I am not. I cannot be first in my life anymore. I cannot even be first in my church! Because this place is God’s altar, not mine. Kind of interesting, isn’t it, that Elijah spent all that time building an altar, and God destroyed it? Elijah was out of business after that one display. It can be tempting, too, in our church, to say that this is the altar we are building for God, when it is just something we are doing to stroke our own egos. It does not matter if you are the pastor, band leader, usher, greeter, or children’s minister, if your ministry is not about God, watch out. If 450 prophets dancing and shouting with all their might do not impress God, neither will our efforts. Instead, God wants our hearts. He wants our passions, our priorities. God, the One who brings fire from heaven, who controls the rain, he alone is God. We worship God in the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit, but no matter how you view God, if he is not your priority, you need to change.

Here is the beautiful thing about this passage. God did not wait for the people to return to him; God sought them out. God showed up. And I promise you, as prophetically as I can, God still does the same today. God answers the

prayers of the righteous person, because a righteous person prays according to God’s will. You can try to pray that your team will win their game on Saturday, and I’m sure God will listen, but the game probably is not on God’s radar. But to pray for someone to be released from anger, addiction, worshiping false gods – now, that’s in God’s will for us. To pray that someone will confess their sin and accept the free gift of salvation offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Lord, become a man or woman of God and seek him in all that they do – yes, that’s a righteous prayer. And you know what, when God answers that prayer, it will be just as amazing as fire falling from heaven, because without God’s action, it may seem completely impossible. But with God, anything is possible.

As a church, let’s pray righteous prayers. Let’s pray for our world. Our community. Our neighbors. Let’s pray for the peace that seems impossible to grasp. Let’s pray for the end of addiction and anger. Let’s pray for God’s holy fire to fall from heaven like it did at Pentecost and ignite believers around the world, starting in this very church. Let’s not dabble between two opinions any longer. Let’s worship God, and only God, and let our prayers reflect that faith.

Memory Verse: Psalm 141:2

“May my prayer be set before You like incense,
my uplifted hands like the evening offering.”