

Sunday June 14, 2020
 Lesson 2: Fire On The Mountain
 Scripture: 1 Kings 18: 20-39

Context:

Our next lesson jumps ahead to the Book of First Kings. The name of the book gives away the content as the author(s) provide the reigns of the kings and what took place during their time. While at first glance, one might think the main characters are those of royal lineage. Yet some of the main characters to represent God are those of the prophets who remind the kings and the people of who God is and who God is not.

Today's lesson focuses on one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible. The contest between Yahweh and Baal on Mount Carmel, fought out in the arena of human events, has captured the musings of writers and artists.¹ The scene is fraught with action and suspense as the characters interact with one another and the reader goes along with each line.

The background is the tension between the followers of Baal and Yahweh. In this case, the people have become worshippers of Baal while still professing to follow Yahweh. The people want their cake and to eat it too. King Ahab is no help as he seems to go back and forth as well, more content to argue with prophets and priests than to listen to their counsel. The deciding factor for Ahab is to hold a contest between the prophets of Baal and Elijah representing Yahweh. When the people seem not to care either way about following only Yahweh, Elijah decides two altars will be set up and the god who answers with fire will be the real God.

At first glance, the contest appears unfairly yoked. There are over four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and only one prophet of God, Elijah. Yet Elijah calls the prophets of Baal to go first with the only condition being they cannot add fire.

The contrast in the contest is stark. The Baal prophets have sketchy preparations, abrupt prayers, and frantic liturgical action hard to follow.² They do strange dances, shout louder, and even cut themselves. They take Elijah's mocking counsel to cry louder, and they transition into what was probably a funeral rite for the temporarily dead Baal to gain their god's attention.³ To no avail do they act, as there is no response to their altar.

When Elijah comes to the altar, things change. His preparations, prayer, and detailed liturgical building of the altar slow the narrative and prevent the climax from

¹ Nelson, Richard D. "First and Second Kings," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for First and Second Kings*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 114.

² *Ibid.*, 117.

³ *Ibid.*, 118.

coming too quickly.⁴ His prayer definitively calls the people to know Yahweh and turn to the true God. The fire descends in dramatic fashion and all around the altar fire consumes every bit. The people confess Yahweh is God and are in awe. God wins the contest.

Application

Wouldn't we pay to watch a contest like the one in First Kings go down today? No wonder writers and artists over the years have immortalized the scene. There are the foolish priests of Baal leaping around in earnest begging Baal to make an appearance. Hold this in comparison to the proud Elijah with a smirk upon his face. The climax of the scene ends with all consuming fire sweeping up the altar and everything around it. The scene is powerful.

Yet perhaps the other reason we would like to see a contest like the one in First Kings is because we know there are other gods being worshipped all around us today. The priests look a little different and the gods do not necessarily look like animals with golden or bronze statues to represent them. The gods today are a little sneakier and humanity seems just as susceptible to them as the people of Israel are to the god of Baal.

Whether we want to admit it or not, we too are like the people of Israel who sometimes cannot decide who we truly worship. We say we worship the one Triune God who governs the universe. Yet we want to have our cake and eat it too.

We want to also worship gods like wealth, status, and prestige. We like these gods because they give us something tangible in return to help us fit into the communities where we live. While wealth is not a bad thing, what happens when it becomes your god. You notice your neighbors driving certain cars and your kids' friends going certain places or wearing certain clothes. You could afford these things, yet it might make things tight. So you decide to skim on tithing to the church.

You'll make up for it in other ways, or so you tell yourself. Once you have the status you want, maybe then you can consider getting back to church or giving your tithe. And then before you know it, you're caught up in a life where you are the cool deal and you've gained all that prestige. God can surely wait for your tithe and your time, or at least until it comes back into fashion.

Do you see how sneaky the gods of the world can be? Once you move to justifying yourself, you give them all the power. Forget God who has made a covenant with you. Our God is indeed powerful and yet at times God is not flashy and does not always represent the popular ways of the world.

Following Jesus does not always guarantee our approval in the sight of the world. In fact, it might even hinder us. The gods of this world sometimes seem so much appealing and at times it may even appear as if we can worship both our God and the gods of this world. Yet there will always come times when we have to decide who we truly worship and claim as our own.

Hopefully along the way, you will have a Mount Carmel moment. In that moment of whatever it may be, you experience God so strongly you realize who God is in your

⁴ Ibid., 118

life. Maybe it comes from reading a scripture and hearing your worth as a child of God and not for what you do or how much money you make. Perhaps it comes from a moment in worship where you feel wonderfully overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit. Or perhaps you see something in your community in which you feel a part of something greater than yourself. God has a way of showing up in surprising places in surprising ways. God is not hindered by our own expectations or our fickle nature when it comes to our feelings about to whom we belong. God has already claimed us as God's own.

What is your favorite part in the scene of the prophets of Baal versus Elijah? What are the gods you see being worshipped and pursued today? How does being a Christian sometimes cost us? Why is important for us to focus on following our Lord instead of the measures of the world? Have you had a Mount Carmel moment where you felt consumed by the power of the Lord? How did it change you?

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009