

April 19, 2009

Whom Will You Follow?

To encourage us to put God first in our lives, for God is faithful to us

Key Bible reference: 1 Kings 18

Key Verse: 1 Kings 18.21

Biblical Background

One of the most intriguing tales concerning the prophet Elijah is that of his contest with the priests of Baal. We do not know for certain the exact place where the contest occurred; Mount Carmel is a prominent mountain that extends eastward from modern Haifa on the Mediterranean Sea. The traditional site for this event lies about 15 miles inland, at an elevation of 1581 feet. This place is named Muhraqa.

1 Kings 18:30 Elijah called the people to "come closer." This was not simply so that they could have a better view of the proceedings but rather so that he could contend with them. The word translated "closer" is also used in Genesis 18:23, where Abraham stands before God to haggle on behalf of the people of Sodom. In the Genesis passage, the word is translated "near."

As a symbolic part of this confrontation, Elijah rebuilt the altar of Yahweh, which presumably the very people who were standing before him had allowed to be thrown down. The altar was likely made of uncut field stones, as prescribed in Deuteronomy 27:5-6.

Verses 31-32. Elijah's act reminds us of Joshua 4:1-7. There we read how the Israelites set up twelve stones as a memorial to the crossing of the Jordan as they entered the Promised Land. These stones were to serve as a memorial of God's faithfulness to the people of Israel. Joshua 4 required that the young be taught

about what God had done for their people. But Elijah was faced with a group that had forgotten God's faithfulness and had allowed the worship of Baal to take the place of true worship.

In Genesis 35:9-10, we read that God spoke to Jacob, blessed him, and said, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." It seems that many of the Israelites in Elijah's time had forgotten the origin of their name, particularly God's role in giving it to them. By using twelve stones symbolizing the tribes of Israel and by building the altar in the name of the Lord, Elijah was reminding the Israelites of their ethnic and spiritual roots. The Good News Bible translates "large enough to contain two measures of seed" (1 Kings 18:32 as "large enough to hold about four gallons of water." This description may help class members visualize the size of the trench. The bulls used for the sacrifice were likely yearlings, so the altar space required would probably not have been more than four or five feet square.

Verses 33-35. Elijah carefully prepared his sacrifice. The detailed description of his preparations is in contrast to the picture provided of the priests of Baal (verses 26-29). Of them it is said merely that they "prepared" it. No mention is even made of an altar for their offering. It is the actions of the priests that are central to this account. Their ritual took all day,

at a cost of great physical and emotional energy.

Elijah, on the other hand, sabotaged his sacrifice. Four jars were filled with water and poured over it, not just once, but three times! The number of jars poured equalled the twelve tribes of Israel. Did Elijah wish to show that the Lord could succeed in spite of the people of Israel? Perhaps. The suggestion some skeptics have made, insisting that Elijah was simply a clever charlatan who doused the offering with a flammable liquid, simply misses the point of the story.

1 Kings 18:36-37. The "time of the offering of the oblation" was most likely in the evening (see Exodus 29:39), after three o'clock. (An oblation [oh-BLAY-shun] is a grain, wine, or oil offering.) The priests took all day to try to cajole Baal into action, without succeeding. Elijah's time came once it had become absolutely clear that Baal was unwilling or unable to respond.

Elijah's prayer was short and simple, in comparison to the lengthy rites of the priests of Baal. He again reminded the people of their roots by calling Yahweh the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel." Those who had drawn near would have heard his prayer and been confronted with the past.

Elijah had asked the people a question: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). But the people had not answered. Simon De Vries understands the people's silence as follows: "The Israelite people had been so confused by countering claims that they had been unable to decide. 'The people answered not a word.' They would not answer

Elijah because they could not answer." They were simply too confused.

The priests had asked Baal to "answer" them (verse 26). But they received no response. Now it was God's turn to answer or not. Elijah had set the stage. His soaking the altar was less a boast than a gamble. Either God would answer and Elijah would be vindicated, or there would be silence and defeat. One might think that the appearance of fire from heaven in and of itself would suffice to persuade the people to return to God. But the addition of the water served to emphasize that the situation was out of the hands of the human prophet and in the hands of the divine.

Just as Ezekiel went beyond the limit, of the believable when he spoke to the people about the dry bones living again (Ezekiel 37), so Elijah went beyond the usual limits of religious practice to challenge the people to choose to serve Yahweh.

1 Kings 18:38-39. God responded with power. Not only did the fire consume the sacrifice and the wood, but the very stones of the altar, the dust of the ground, and the water in the trench as well—all were consumed. The simple prayer of Elijah accomplished what all the actions of the priests of Baal could not.

God's powerful response not only testified that he was God alone, it certified that Elijah was indeed his prophet. Biblical names are meaningful. Elijah's name consists of three elements: El = God, i = my, and jah = Yahweh. In English order it translates, "My God (is) Yahweh." God's response to the prophet's prayer bore spectacular witness to the truth of that name.

Elijah had lived through three years in which he was hunted like a criminal. At Mount Carmel he was vindicated for his unswerving loyalty to God.

Verse 39. The people, once confused and silent, now cried out, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God." (Compare this affirmation to Deuteronomy 6:4, which is a traditional affirmation of faith in the Jewish tradition.) In the face of polytheism and as a response to Elijah's challenge, "If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21), we are reminded that the purpose of this lesson is to encourage us to put God first in our lives; for God is faithful to us.

Recall the response of Joshua, when faced with the threat of foreign deities: "But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

Prayer

Dear God, we seek to serve you with faith and loyalty. Help us to keep you first in our lives. Have mercy upon us when we go astray, and bless us when we are faithful and true. In the name of your Son, we pray. Amen.

Conclude by praying together the Prayer of Confession (The United Methodist Hymnal, 891).