

The Prophets and the Kings: Elijah on Mount Carmel

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

September 21, 2026 – AM Sermon

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1 Kings 18:16-41

What an amazing story. This conflict has been brewing for some time. Elijah and Ahab have been antagonizing each other for a while now, but it's always been at a distance. It's not clear that the two of them have met before this day. But today on Mount Carmel the two foes finally collide. To the crowd gathered there, it must have looked like a heavyweight title fight. In one corner of the ring we have Elijah. He's standing by himself. He's got no supporters. He has no entourage. He's standing there alone, bearded and stern – his tattered robe rustling in the wind. In the other corner there's Ahab in his royal robes. Ahab has a huge entourage. 450 Baal prophets. 400 prophets of Asherah. They're all chanting his name. "Ahab, Ahab, Ahab!"

To the crowd standing there, Elijah and Ahab would look like the main combatants in this fight. But Elijah knows better. Ahab and Elijah aren't the main combatants here. They are stand-ins. The real fight is between Yahweh, the God of Israel and Baal the god of the Phoenicians. Before the fight begins, Elijah makes sure the people see the real combatants. He does that by asking them a question, and it's the central question of this passage. It's the question we see in verse 21 and it's not just a question for the people it's a question for us too. "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal is God follow him!"

It's a question the people needed to hear, because the people in those days were into the diversification of their religious portfolio. Diversification is a good practice in the investment world. When you invest you want to diversify. Put some money in stocks, put some in bonds. Put some in real estate. Make sure you have some liquid cash. Have some investments that are safe and stable. Have some investments that are more aggressive. I'm not a financial advisor; I'm a minister but even I know that's good practice! If one part of your portfolio goes bad – say the real estate market tanks – you'll still have some of these other areas to support you.

The people of Israel had that approach when it came to religion. If one god was good, maybe two was better. Maybe three was better still. They could worship Yahweh and keep the old religion of their Fathers, but why not broaden your portfolio?! Baal was good with the rain and growing the crops. Why not add a little Baal worship to your portfolio? Asherah was more about fertility and having children. So, get a little Asherah into the mix when you're trying to get pregnant. Cover your bases. The technical name for this is syncretism, but the psychology of it is covering your bases, expanding your options.

You can make it sound sensible and reasonable, but as this passage makes very clear, it is neither sensible nor reasonable; it is the way of death. The Lord hates this syncretism. He hates it because he's a jealous God, and he's said, "You shall have no other gods before me." He also hates it because he knows what it will do to his people. He made us to be wholeheartedly connected to him in a relationship of love. All our roots are meant to go down into his stream. When they do, we flourish. When we send our roots out towards these other gods and drink from their streams, it might taste yummy for about 5 seconds, but in the end it will kill us.

And so, to bring the people back to wholehearted devotion, the Lord sets up this confrontation with Baal. In this corner: Yahweh the Lord of hosts, the Lord of the angel armies, the keeper of Israel. In the other corner: Baal, the god of Jezebel, the Lord of the storm. Honestly, it's not much of a fight. Baal is exposed as a fraud. He has no power. In the end, it's a beat down. The four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal spend all day praying wildly to their god, they dance wildly around the altar and cut themselves with knives, and they get nothing. By contrast, Elijah stands up all by himself, he prays one calm prayer, and the fire of the Lord comes down and not only does it consume the soaking wet sacrifice; it consumes the wood and the stones and the

soil. The people see fire of the Lord and they proclaim the victor: "The Lord he is God! The Lord he is God!" They seize the prophets of Baal and all 450 of them are put to the sword.

So, as I said, this is a great story, a powerful story, but I wonder does this story feel close to our reality? Prophetic contests on the tops of mountains? Bulls sacrificed on altars? Fire falling from heaven? Priests of an ancient god dancing and cutting themselves with knives? Does this seem like a story from our life and our world? Or does it seem like an amazing story from long ago and far away? It would be easy to read this story and say: "Wow. Interesting, but I don't know what it has to do with me."

I tell you this story sits closer to our experience than you think. For instance, let's take those frantic prophets cutting themselves with knives as a way to appease their god. That's closer to our world than you think. There's a commercial that I've seen multiple times recently. It's a commercial for the Good Feet store and it features a woman who comes on and says, "I love shoes. I love shopping for shoes, I see them and they call to me. But the best ones, they hurt - they really hurt. But it's worth it!" Do you know the commercial I'm talking about? Now I don't know what's in this woman's heart. I don't know how important fashion and beauty are to her, but she is willing to endure pain, she is willing to endure blisters, she is willing to bleed for the sake of looking good.

And of course people do a lot more than endure sore feet for the sake of beauty. They also get plastic surgery. They spend thousands of dollars to let people cut them with knives so that they can look beautiful. God knows these people's hearts, not me, but are some of these people allowing themselves to be cut as an offering to the idol of beauty? Absolutely. Think about the promises made in the marketing of cosmetic surgery: "You will feel so much better about yourself!" If that's not a religious promise, I don't know what is.

An idol is a good thing created by God that we make an object of ultimate concern. An idol is a good and beautiful gift of God, that we turn into something foundational, something that we look to for our help. People definitely do that with beauty and appearance. In our society beauty can be an idol every bit as potent as Baal. Think about all the industries in orbit around beauty: the fashion industry, cosmetics, diet, exercise, cosmetic surgery. There are lots of temples you can go to where you can worship this god and make your offering.

But here's the tricky part: most people don't worship beauty outright. Certainly no one here worships beauty exclusively; we're more likely to make it part of our divine buffet. We don't worship beauty instead of God. We worship God and beauty. Just like Israel, we diversify our portfolio. The answer to the question "where does my help come from?" becomes more complicated. Instead of simply: 'My help is in the name of the Lord who made the heavens and the earth,' now it's: "My help is in the Lord, but it's also in my looks, and my 401K, and my professional success, and my social standing and..." We don't abandon Jesus; we worship "Jesus and ..."

There are lots of things we put on the other end of that and... 15 years ago Tim Keller published *Counterfeit Gods*, his book on modern idolatry and he listed multiple idols that we put alongside God. Jesus and money. Jesus and power. Jesus and success. Jesus and romantic love. Jesus and family. Jesus and our politics. I think most of us have an 'and' in our life.

God and success is a dangerous one for us. I think of how we prioritize and organize the lives of our children these days. We all know that getting children involved in sports or music or anything is more all-consuming than it used to be. If you want your child to succeed in sports in High School, you have to make a substantial offering of time and money. A substantial offering. When parents make those offerings, they usually justify it for the sake of success and happiness. My kid loves music! My kid loves her sport. I'm teaching her to be a leader. I'm teaching him discipline so he will be successful.

All of that is fine. Success is not necessarily evil. It's better than failure. Happiness is certainly a good thing. It's better than misery. But, because they are good things, both of them can also be idols. As we dedicate a lot of your time and your money to have her learn to play her violin, as we dedicate a lot of our time and money to teach our children to kick a ball or hit a ball, what's the ratio of time and money spent on those things, compared to the amount of time and money spent on learning the ways of Jesus? Or compared

to practicing habits that deepen their connection to Christ and his church? Or compared to teaching them to share their strength with the weakest members of society? We can spend hours and hours and hours teaching our children the nuances of a golf swing, but is that matched by an effort to teach them the disciplines and habits of faith?

This is really complicated. Sometimes the sports and the music can be part of their faith formation, so the calculus is really hard. It's really complicated for you parents. But I will tell you this: every minister I know, every single one of them, laments that church formation is increasingly squeezed out by other things. Sometimes it feels like the 'ands' are winning.

Another popular pursuit is leisure and happiness. Some of us older adults who have the means to enjoy some of life's pleasures, restaurants, travel, second homes, we spend a lot of time maneuvering ourselves to enjoy life's pleasures and amusements. Again, these are good things. Jesus enjoyed a good wedding party. He loved a dinner party with his friends. Leisure and happiness are gifts. But again, because they are good things they can become idols. Billions of dollars are spent every year telling us that leisure experiences are the key to true happiness and that we deserve them. Are we in danger of making a good thing into an idol? Is this a 'Jesus and' situation?

To be clear, I am not pointing the finger at any specific person here, but I am asking the hard questions raised by this passage, and it's my job to ask you these questions. John Calvin said: The heart is an endless factory of idols. He's right. I am convinced that every single person here, including yours truly, has some 'Jesus and' going on inside of us. We are all struggling with some sort of idol. When Elijah says to Israel, "How long will you waver between two opinions?" that question is for me.

Here's what I realized this week. When I first heard this passage as a child and even now as I hear it as an adult, my first instinct is to see myself on team Elijah. My first instinct is to see myself in Elijah's corner. I'm one of the god guys! But the more I've studied this week, I think I am actually more in the camp of the people and the prophets of Baal than I want to admit. We all are.

Which is why we need that other story. This story points ahead to another story. Another story where the Lord goes toe to toe with an enemy, this time the enemy is not Baal, but Baal's master, the Evil One himself.

Just like in our story, this battle also takes place at the time of the evening sacrifice – 3 pm. Just like in our story, the battle takes place on a mountain, only this time the mountain is Calvary. Hundreds of years later God would again go toe to toe with his ancient foe, and on that mountain too, he would win a great victory! Through his death and resurrection, Jesus dealt a mortal blow to the powers of evil. One more parallel between these two battles: right after the Lord has proved victorious in the fight against Baal, what do the people say? "The Lord, he is God." And what does the centurion say right after Jesus dies and wins his victory? "Surely this man is the son of God!"

There are parallels between these mountains, but there are differences too, and the differences matter. On Mount Carmel, what happened to the guilty? The prophets of Baal were seized and they were slaughtered. The sinners were killed for their sins. It's a difficult judgement for our modern ears, but utterly consistent with scripture. These men were idolaters, and the wages of sin are death. The idolaters pay the wages of sin and the people cry, The Lord he is God! But at the cross, who gets slaughtered? Who gets put to the sword? Who pays the price? It's Jesus.

How can this be? Because we are the sinners. We are the 'Jesus and...' people. We are the ones who ought to suffer the fate of the prophets of Baal. But Jesus takes it. The wages of sin are still death, but it's our wages and his death. And later, when the fire falls from heaven it is the Pentecostal fire of the Holy Spirit. God sends that fire not to destroy us, but to purify us, to change us from one degree of glory to the next. Do you see the differences between these two stories, and do you see how the difference between them is our hope for salvation?

All this is amazing grace for us sinners, but one thing it doesn't change is our call. In this story Elijah calls the people to leave their idols and follow the Lord wholeheartedly. And Even though Jesus takes the

punishment on himself, his call is no less pointed. You must leave your idols, and “love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your souls and all your mind and all your strength.” So, I say to all you ‘Jesus and’ people. Jesus loves you. Jesus died for you. Yes, you with all your weakness and your waffling, you with all your fear and your doubt. Now Go. Leave your idols behind and learn to serve him with all your heart.

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