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Covenant Presbyterian Church
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#3 in Elijah series
Text: I Kings 18:16b-40

. . . and Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire --he is God."

Then all the people said, "What you say is good."

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the

evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

"Do it again," he said, and they did it again.

"Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD --he is God! The LORD --he is God!"

Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

Prayer For Illumination:

God of the prophets, God of consuming fire, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: in Your covenant faithfulness, send forth the fire of Your Holy Spirit to accompany the reading and hearing of Your Holy Word; that Your truth and righteousness may be emblazoned upon our hearts. Set our souls on fire with a holy passion, that we may offer ourselves as living sacrifices of obedience and praise to You, the one and only True and Living God; through Jesus Christ Who is our eternal prophet, priest, and king. Amen.

Elijah: his name, Eli Jah , literally means, "My God is Yahweh," or, as we would say it, "My God is the LORD!" Thus his name spoke the message of his life; for Elijah lived during a time when other gods were being worshiped in the land of Israel, during the reign of King Ahab and his Phoenician wife, Jezebel, around 870-850 B.C.

Hollywood might do well to produce an action-packed thriller on the life of Elijah and his battle against Ahab and Jezebel and their idolatrous, wicked ways. And the passage we read today is certainly among the greatest of all the Old Testament stories. It has all the suspense, bizarre

characters, and supernatural surprise of a Steven Spielberg production. The only difference is: it's not fantasy; it's not fiction. It is truth. It speaks truth, it reveals truth, and it calls us to the truth of the one and only true and living God. As such, it is a passage of life and death, blessing and curse. And it is not simply about Elijah and his day; it is about us and our day.

At this point, I want to share some of my own personal feelings about this sermon. First, I don't enjoy addressing the sordid, perverse, and controversial issues of our society from the pulpit. If you wish I didn't do so, please believe me: I wish I didn't have to!

Secondly, I have had reservations about addressing such issues in the presence of children. But, as much as we try to shelter and shield our precious children from the wickedness of this world (as I think we should), we must also realize that they are already being exposed to it all in very negative ways. It is our responsibility, as God's people, to discuss these matters with our children in very positive ways, teaching them the truth, simply and straightforwardly, from God's Word. If we don't, who will?

Thirdly, it is not my intent to attack, bash on, beat up, or put down anyone personally. The fact is that, over the past twenty-five to thirty years, the spiritual forces of Canaanite culture have run rampant in our society. In one way or another, we've all been a part of it. And we've all been hurt, some more directly than others; but all of us have suffered from this onslaught of pagan idolatry. And if you, or anyone you know and love, have been or are now struggling with or suffering from the sins of Canaanite Baalism, I'm not here today to pronounce condemnation.

I'm here to proclaim the grace and power and mercy of the true God, the living God the great and holy and good God Who calls us all to repentance and to whole-life commitment for our own good; the God Who promises to forgive and to cleanse us of all our sins through the blood of Jesus Christ; the God Who delivers us out of darkness into His marvelous light, and Who gives us a new life to live in His truth and righteousness and peace and joy; the God Who created us for Himself so that we might know Him and love Him and enjoy the fullness of life forever. This sermon is not intended to hurt anyone personally; but if we feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit upon us, let us not harden our hearts in rebellion, but submit ourselves to the wound by which we are healed, and turn in repentance to receive the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This call to repentance with the promise of new life goes even to the Jezebels and prophets of Baal in our society and the church today--those who purposefully use their influence and power to approve, defend, support, promote, and even make their living by, the wicked ways of Baalism. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. In His goodness, He continually calls us to "turn back, turn back," from our evil ways, and live! [Ezek.33:11]. Yet, with regard to those who promote and encourage sin, Jesus said,

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea [Matt.18:6].

Now, back to Elijah and his battle with Ahab, Jezebel, and the prophets of Baal. The historian of

I Kings introduces Ahab to us this way:

Ahab ...did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him....[H]e erected an altar for Baal (the fertility god) ...and ...also made the Asherah. (The asherah were the idols for the worship of the female fertility goddess.) In his days, Hiel ...built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of his first-born, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son

....

[I Kings 16:30-34].

This summarizes the perversions and atrocities of Canaanite Baalism, which permeated Israel in the days of Ahab and Jezebel. Baalism was essentially a nature religion, with Baal and his sister-consort worshiped as the god and goddess of fertility. The religious rituals of Baalism were intended to call forth the blessings of fertility. These rituals involved sacred prostitution of both sexes, and other orgiastic abominations. (1)

Secondly, the reference to Hiel, who rebuilt Jericho with the death of his first-born and youngest sons, is evidence of the well-known practice of child-sacrifice in Canaanite culture.

Archaeologists have uncovered numerous houses with "foundation sacrifices" of infants. The Phoenicians (Jezebel's people), practiced both this "foundation sacrifice" for good luck in their homes as well as "fertility sacrifices" of their children as burnt offerings. Archaeologists have uncovered vast sacrificial cemeteries in ancient Phoenician culture; and references to this barbaric atrocity, in connection with Baalism and its sexual abominations, are found elsewhere in the Scripture [Lev.18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:30-32; 32:35].

All of this is the background of what Elijah was up against in his battle against Baalism. But underneath it all is the fundamental question of human life: Who, or what, is our God? At stake was, and is, the fundamental point of the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before Me." At stake was, and is, true faith or idolatry. And Elijah was simply saying, "You can't have it both ways." He mocked the halting jig that they danced around the altar of Baal. "How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

Remember: the LORD our God is a jealous God [Ex.20:5]. He tolerates no rivals. Flirtation with false gods is spiritual adultery. Half-hearted devotion is a slap in His holy face. When Jesus said, "Follow Me," He wasn't calling us to limp along in lukewarm hypocrisy with one foot in and one foot out. The LORD our God commands us to love Him "with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength" [Deut.6:4]. He jealously loves us and He is impassioned with a holy jealousy for our love.

Why? For our own good! For our own well-being, eternally! To love and worship the living God is life and peace and joy; but to love and worship false gods is darkness, destruction, and death. Idolatry always leads to insanity and promotes inhumanity and ends in disaster. And that is exactly what we have in contemporary Canaanite Baalism.

The idea of a fertility god and goddess and the rituals of sexual immorality and child sacrifice may seem very strange to us; but let's think about it, in today's context.

Isn't it true that the whole realm of sexuality has become a sort of religion? Isn't "sex" worshiped as the secret of happiness and the goal of life?--the most important expression of our personal identity, freedom, power, and personal fulfillment--so much so that it has been elevated to the status of a "right." Anything that important, that powerful, which captures the mind and soul of a culture, can rightly be called a matter of religion in the truest sense of the word.

Furthermore, as it was in ancient Baalism, today sexual immorality is a vehicle of entering into and experiencing transcendent mysticism and spiritual ecstasy. I suspect that what we might see on an MTV rock video, with its characters' choreographed, frenzied passion powerfully portrayed on the screen to the rhythm of sensual music, is not unlike the impassioned frenzy of the Baal worshipers in Elijah's day. Homosexual behavior is another manifestation of this deep-seated spiritual confusion which results in sexual insanity.

After twenty-five years of so-called "sexual liberation," American families are in shreds, and the number one killer of young adults in America is AIDS. Meanwhile, the Presbyterian General Assembly, tossed to and fro by the winds of inclusive pluralism while lost on a sea of moral relativism, has just voted to "go limping along between two opinions" in a three-year study on the question of ordaining those who affirm and engage in homosexual behavior.

Along with this sexual religion, we have our own form of child-sacrifice: Thirty million in the past twenty years, roughly one-third of all conceptions. Of course, no one would ever say that it is a religious ritual; but, you know, when you think about it in the very terms that abortion-rights advocates speak of it, it sounds religious. It is said that it is a matter of "personal conscience," that it has to do with personal freedom and fulfillment, controlling one's destiny, economic well-being, and "psychological (which could be translated, literally, 'spiritual') health" of the mother. Think about it: Ahab and Jezebel want us to believe that killing our offspring will solve our problems, make things better for us, bring us security, and lead to happiness. Doesn't that sound like a religion? Especially when supported as a "moral decision" by religious leaders of our day!

The point here is not self-righteous judgment on those who have fallen into the pit of Baalism. As I said at the outset, we've all been a part of it, and we've all suffered from it. The Ahabs and Jezebels and prophets of Baal in politics and education and especially the church who defend, approve, and promote this idolatry are in danger of the greatest judgment, like the false prophets whom Elijah slew after the fire fell from heaven. But what's really at stake today is exactly what was at stake in Elijah's day: Truth or idolatry; blessing or curse; life or death.

Elijah calls out today, "How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal is god, follow him."

In that dramatic scene on Mt. Carmel, we see the futility of false gods and the power of the LORD. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a sacrificial contest. He gave them every advantage. He let them choose their own bull. He allowed them to go first. "Let Baal send fire from heaven, if he can!" And they called out to Baal, and danced around the altar, and even cut themselves in a ritual of pagan spiritual frenzy in order to incite Baal to action. But no fire fell from heaven.

"What's the matter?" Elijah asked. "Maybe Baal is too busy, or has gone on a journey, or is going to the bathroom, or maybe he's asleep; try to wake him up!" But Baal never answered. And he never will. Baal will never be able to answer the cries and the groans and the longings and the needs of the people who dance around his altar. Idolatry is a bottomless pit of darkness, destruction, and death which produces insanity and promotes inhumanity, and ends in disaster. And, therefore, the LORD our God, a jealous God, commands us, "You shall have no other gods before Me"--that is, no other gods before My face, no other gods in My sight, no other gods in My holy presence--in other words, no other gods in our life.

As evening fell, Elijah rebuilt the altar of the LORD, with twelve stones symbolizing God's covenant with the twelve tribes of Israel. He put the bull on the altar, and then called for water to be poured out upon it, three times, so that water soaked the altar and even filled-up the trench. And then Elijah prayed: Elijah prayed for the repentance and salvation of the people of God who had fallen into Baal worship. "Answer me, O LORD, that this people may know that You are God, and that You have turned their heart back again." [I Kg.18:37]

And the fire of the LORD fell, like a lightning bolt from heaven, and consumed the bull and the wood and the water. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God!"

In the New Testament The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that our God "is a consuming fire." [Heb.12:29] The prophet Elijah and his fiery sacrifice point us to our great and eternal prophet, Jesus Christ, Who offered Himself up as the perfect sacrifice for all our sins to deliver us from the dominion of darkness, destruction, and death. On the cross, Jesus was lifted up as the lightning rod of God's wrath against sin. There on Golgotha, fire fell from heaven to consume all our sins which He had taken upon Himself. This is God's way of turning our hearts back to Him, so that through Jesus, we may live. And it is through Jesus, that fire falls from heaven upon us--the fire of the Holy Spirit to inflame our lives with a holy passion so that we may offer ourselves as "living sacrifices" of obedience and thanksgiving and praise, to the one and only true and living God. [Rom.12:1-2] May God save us from limping hearts and limping lives, that we may love and follow Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; and to His name be the glory. Amen.

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Endnote

1. John Bright, The Kingdom of God (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953,1980), p.52.