

Choose and Follow

Dr. Lal Hmingliani Browne



1 Kings 18:20-39

1 Kings 18:26-29 & 36-39

Our scripture lesson today comes from 1 Kings. I am going to read 1 Kings 18:26-29 and 36-39. This story is about a contest between God and Baal. Baal represents a series of regional pagan gods. The contest takes place between Baal's 450 prophets and Elijah, the one remaining prophet of God. The test is to see which of them can get their god to send a divine response of fire upon a sacrifice.

THE PROPHETS OF BAAL GO FIRST. NOW FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.' Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

THE PROPHETS OF BAAL GO FIRST. NOW FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this

people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.' Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.'

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

LET US PRAY

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our God and our Redeemer. Amen.

SERMON

Lately my husband, Will, and I have been watching 'Madam Secretary' on Netflix. It is a show about a former CIA analyst and college professor who becomes Secretary of State. Will watches all of the shows. I watch some and, some of the time, the show watches me. Anyway, in one episode, the Secretary's CIA past leads to a fight with her oldest daughter. As her daughter walks out the door, the secretary says,

"If you hear nothing else I ever say, hear this. Everything is more complicated than you think it is right now. ..."

Life is complicated. Oldest children are commonly misunderstood as bossy people who get to tell others what to do and boss around younger siblings. Trust me, that is not the truth. I am the oldest of six children and I know. We carry the burden of the world instead of being spoiled like the youngest children.

It is commonly understood in most cultures that a girl's sixteenth birthday is known as sweet sixteen and is a time for a big party. My party was all planned and it was going to be fun! However, one of my twin baby brothers had leukemia. Before my birthday Richard died. My mother couldn't handle it and lost her mind for almost a year.

My father asked me to choose whether we should send

mother to an institution or keep her at home with a caregiver. Part of that choice was that I would become the manager of our household while my father earned our living. I chose to keep my mother at home. I had to supervise the help, including my mother's full-time caregiver, and make sure my siblings did homework and got to school on time. Along with my father, I comforted my siblings about Richard and tried to help them understand why mother was the way she was. Life became very complicated for me!

Being sixteen was lost in the midst of the chaos and being sweet ... well I am still looking for that. Never tell an oldest child that life is simple! Of course, husband Will, insists there is one thing more complicated and that is living with an oldest child! Mind you, he is a middle child, the carefree kind who really listens to no one unless he already wants to.

Some years ago in another time and place, I was doing pre-marital counseling with a couple in their 20s. Sounds simple. I have done so many times.

First complication. During the second session the bride and I discovered that the groom had just found out he was the father of a young boy.

Second complication. We found out he was delighted by what his old girlfriend told him. He was absolutely thrilled to be a father.

Third complication. The bride was furious.

Fourth complication. The groom was oblivious and

insisted his newly found two-and-a-half year old son be the ring bearer. The groom chose his new status as a father over his soon-to-be status as a husband.

Fifth complication. When it came time for the wedding, the little boy was there but was miserable because he knew no one. He didn't even yet comprehend who the groom was to him. It took him forever to get down the aisle to the chancel. As soon as he gave me the pillow with the rings he ran off.

Sixth complication ... the little boy has now stolen the show. The bride is fuming. The happy groom is smiling unaware he has to go home with the bride and face the

“**For God is the holy One who seeks a living relationship of love with us. Our God is always moving toward us with love, grace, forgiveness and salvation.**”

music. ... Real life is really complicated.

At Church of the Palms we are following the Narrative Lectionary about God's preparing the way with God's people. This week's Bible story tells us how God gives direction for us when life is complicated.

We read the cleaned up, sanitized, children-friendly parts of the story. What came before and after and around what I read to you is the context of real life ... and it is complicated. Prophet Elijah is properly paranoid because the King and Queen are out to kill

him. King Ahab is a wimp who has forgotten he is a Jew. He is afraid of his wife, Queen Jezebel, (who is from Sidon) and does whatever she demands. Queen Jezebel is a dangerous woman. She has already had almost all of the prophets of God killed. She seeks to impose her pagan faith on the people of Israel.

Now, going back to the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. God does not leave Elijah alone where he has hidden himself. God sends him to talk with the King and to call the King back to following and worshipping God alone. We read in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 the first commandment God gave through Moses to the people of Israel:

“The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Despite his fear, Elijah goes and does what God told him to do. But when the King refuses, Elijah sets the place of the contest to be upon Mount Carmel, which is a lawless place full of caves and outlaws. It is not a place a Queen would grace with her presence (which is perhaps why King Ahab agrees). The people of Israel follow along, confused and afraid. The 450 prophets of Baal call Baal to send down fire. They get no answer. Elijah calls on God and fire descends consuming everything. Our Bible story, tells us,

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.’

God and Elijah win. Baal and Baal’s prophets lose. This is not a friendly game where everybody shakes hands after the struggle. This is “winner-takes-all and losers-die!”

Elijah gives one more command. It is not enough that the people say they choose God. They must prove it in action. Elijah orders the people to take the prophets of Baal off the mountain down into the wadi below and kill them. They must show the Queen that the people of Israel are God’s people and God’s alone. The people do as Elijah instructed.

In this story God can be understood as saying, “Without me everything is more complicated than you think it is.” Like the people then, we have to choose God. Choosing God brings order and direction and sure victory into our complicated lives.

What else does this Bible story mean for us?

It means life is an ongoing journey full of joys, events and complications. But we are not alone. God is with us at all times. In the end, God will prevail and everything will be all right.

It means we must be humble and admit that we understand only some small part of what is going on and so we must look to God for guidance again and again.

It means we must admit our need for one another - for individually we are frail in mind and spirit and body. Left to ourselves, our minds are too good at self-deceit. Our spirits are hesitant when we need to be bold. We are arrogant when we need to be humble. Our bodies are mortal. We need each other’s strengths and gifts. We need people to teach us. We need people to hold us accountable. As a community of faith, we need one another every day.

In John 15:12, Jesus said to us,

“Love one another as I have loved you.” We need to remember, as Hebrews 11:1 tells us, that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

We worship and serve God who is far beyond our understanding and is never under our command. Yet, in the midst of all this complexity and difficulty, we rejoice. As 1 Peter 1:6-9 tells us,

“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith - being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire - may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him;

and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving as the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Madam Secretary was right. Life is complicated, at times extremely complicated. It is the very reason that we choose to believe that God alone is God.

We can live life calling on forces and powers that cannot save us, or we can choose to join the march of the saints before us and follow the One who alone is God. For God is the holy One who seeks a living relationship of love with us. Our God is always moving toward us with love, grace, forgiveness and salvation.

As we prepare the way of following God, we must respond to Elijah’s challenge and to Joshua’s call (Joshua 24:15) “choose this day whom you will serve!”

Choosing to take the first commandment as our own we say.

“The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. [We] shall love the Lord [our] God with all [our] hearts, and with all [our] souls, and with all [our] might.”

Thanks be to God!

Amen.



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