



Sermon Transcript March 1, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption Follow Jesus! 1 Kings 18:20-40

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 1, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
1 Kings 18:20-40

²⁰ So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. ²¹ And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. ²² Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. ²³ Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. ²⁴ And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken." ²⁵ Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." ²⁶ And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. ²⁷ And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." ²⁸ And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. ²⁹ And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down. ³¹ Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name," ³² and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. ³³ "And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." ³⁴ And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time. ³⁵ And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

³⁶ And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and

said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. ³⁷ Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” ³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹ And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” ⁴⁰ And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.” And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

Setting the Scene

The story we are about to look at this morning is what most people think about when they think of the prophet Elijah. Who can blame them? It is a great story. It is hard to find a more dramatic tale than the one we are about to look at this morning. I would go so far as to say that this story is even a bit entertaining. I don't mean to diminish in any way how the glory of God is made known through this story, but it is hard to read this story without being somewhat amused at how Elijah taunts the 450 prophets of Baal.

But before we dive into this story, we need to first “set the scene” so that we can really appreciate what is happening here. It is possible to read this spectacular story and get caught up with all the “special effects” and miss the point of this story. There are two things Elijah says in verse 21 that really “set the scene” for this story.

The first statement comes in the form of a question. In verse 20 we learn that the people of Israel, with 450 prophets of Baal and King Ahab have all congregated at the top of Mt. Carmel at the invitation of the prophet Elijah. The first thing Elijah asks them is this question found in verse 21. “*How long will you go on limping between two different opinions.*” That is a great question. A. W. Pink says that the word used here for *limp* carries the idea of *tottering*. He said, “Sometimes, they tottered over to the side of the God of Israel, and then they lurched like an intoxicated man over on the side of the false gods.”¹ As a result, they were not walking uprightly. They were not walking with God.

How long has this been going on? Well, in some sense you could ask, “When has this not been a problem for the people of Israel?” Did they not erect and worship a golden calf when they were at Mount Sinai? And then we saw last week that when they finally entered the land God had given them, time and time again they found themselves

worshiping the gods of Canaan. From the book of Judges we learned that part of their problem was that they didn't have a king. So the king of God's own choosing, a king after God's own heart, David became Israel's king. God promised David that he would have an heir who will sit on his throne and the immediate answer to that promise was his son Solomon. Although Solomon is known for being a wise king, at the end of his reign he marries many foreign women and he worships their gods. As a result, God announces that the kingdom of Israel will be torn away from him. So, in one sense, when has this *limping* and *tottering* between two opinions not been an issue for Israel?

But this question—“*How long will you go limping between two different opinions?*”— has a more narrow focus to it. As we make our way through CASKET EMPTY we are in the letter “K” which stands for “Kings.” And this is the part of the chart that gets very dense and filled with a lot of names; names of kings and prophets. The tragedy of this time period is that because Solomon was *limping between two opinions* the kingdom of Israel was torn into two. There were ten tribes who consolidated together to the north and they were known as Israel. After Solomon, they broke away from the remaining two tribes to the south, which was known as Judah. Judah, the two tribes to the south, occupied the city of Jerusalem, the temple that Solomon built and the throne of David.

One of the first things Jeroboam I did when he broke away from Judah and took with him the ten tribes to the north, was to erect a golden calf at the northern end of the kingdom and at the southern end of the kingdom. And he announced to the people of Israel, the ten tribes to the north, “*Behold your gods, O Israel who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.*” He did this to keep the people of Israel from going down into Jerusalem to worship at the temple that Solomon had built.

So when we climb Mount Carmel this morning with the prophet Elijah and King Ahab, we are standing with people who are part of the ten tribes to the north, the ten tribes of Israel. We are about 60 years removed from the time when the kingdom was divided and Jeroboam I erected the two golden calves at either end of the kingdom. And now look at how bad things have gotten in Israel. We learn in verse 19 that not only are there 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah, but they *eat at Jezebel's table*. They are funded and supported by the palace. In fact, we learn that up to this point, there was no king in Israel who had done more to provoke the wrath of God than Ahab. What Ahab did made what Jeroboam I did seem like “a light thing.”

Consequently, God sent his prophets to the ten tribes of Israel. He sent them to warn the people of Israel of coming judgment and to call them to repent. To the ten tribes to

the north, he sent the prophets Elijah, Elisha, Hosea and Amos. The sad commentary about these ten tribes to the north is that over their 200 year span of history, not one king responded to the call of God through the prophets. Not one king led the people of Israel to repent. Ironically, this was the same time period when the prophet Jonah went to the foreign city of Nineveh where he found a far more receptive audience than in all of Israel. When Nineveh repented, God relented of his judgment. But Israel did not repent. And so, we discover in 2 Kings 17 that God eventually removes the ten tribes of Israel and all we have left is the two tribes to the south, the two tribes of Judah.

“How long will you go limping between two different opinions?” It is easy to shake your head in disbelief at how far Israel had fallen away from God. But if we are honest this morning, I think we know quite well what it is like to “limp between two different opinions.” Jesus identifies the idol of our culture that we find ourselves often tottering toward: the idol of money. He says in Matthew 6:24, *“No one can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God and money.”* Brian Rosner wrote a book on the New Testament teaching on greed called *Greed and Idolatry*. I think we are so immersed in a materialistic culture that we can’t even see how we “limp” and “totter” between worshiping God and money. He concludes in his book, “to acquire and keep for oneself more money and material things is an attack on God’s exclusive right to human love, trust and obedience.”² It makes me swallow hard and wonder what my Mount Carmel challenge would look like.

The temptation for us to “limp between two opinions” is called out again in Revelation 3 when Jesus addresses the church at Laodicea. To the church he said, *“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!”* Cold water is refreshing to drink. A hot bath is a tonic to a chilly body. But what good is lukewarm water? You want to spit it out of your mouth. Basically, Jesus is saying here that he wants us to be “all in” - cold or hot! There is no fence to straddle when it comes to following Jesus. We are either following him or not. We are either serving God or not. We need to ponder the question asked by Elijah, *“How long will you go limping between two different opinions?”*

This leads us to the second statement that “sets the scene” for what unfolds at the top of Mount Carmel. Elijah’s challenge is pretty simple. He says to the crowd gathered before him, *“If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”* Is it Yahweh or is it Baal? That is the question that sets the course for life. We are now into the season that leads us to Easter. The devotional reading for this week encourages us to keep the cross and the empty tomb together. Kelly Kapic says that the cross without the

resurrection “is like a golf swing with no follow through: The ball doesn’t get where it needs to go.”³ It is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that affirms for us that “Jesus Christ is the Lord of heaven and earth.” If he rose from the dead, then he is the Lord. And if Jesus is the Lord, we too need to heed the words of Elijah. “If Jesus is God, follow him!” The invitation of Jesus to you is not just to believe. The invitation is to follow him. If he is Lord of heaven and earth, then follow him.

The LORD He Is God!

Do you know who Michael Buffer is? He is an announcer for professional boxing and professional wrestling. Prior to a fight, with dramatic flair, Michael Buffer whips the crowd into a frenzy when he says with his rich and deep baritone voice, “Lets get ready to rumble.” I was tempted to have that playing at this point in the sermon with the theme song from *Rocky* playing in the background. That is the kind of feel you have here on top of Mount Carmel with the pending contest between Baal and God.

When Elijah asked the people of Israel, “*How long will you go limping between two different opinions?*” they didn’t say anything. So Elijah poses the idea of this contest between the LORD and Baal. He wants to show them which one of the two is the true God. And so here is the contest. In one corner you have Baal with 450 prophets and in another corner you have the LORD and one prophet—Elijah. We pick up the story in verse 22. “*Then Elijah said to the people . . . Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.*” And all the people answered, “*It is well spoken.*”

There was an archaeological discovery made in the 1920’s in Syria. This discovery shed invaluable light on the gods worshiped by the Canaanites, including the most popular god of all, Baal. It was discovered that he was the god of thunder, lighting and rain. They also discovered an image of Baal holding a lightning bolt in his hand. Now, the people of Israel should have already known who was the true God because at the word of the LORD spoken by the prophet Elijah, there had not been any rain in the land for over three years. Already, the LORD was demonstrating his superiority over Baal, this supposed “god of rain.” This three year drought is what caused King Ahab to nickname Elijah “*the troubler of Israel*” and it made him a most wanted man. In fact, Elijah had been in hiding during most of this time. But no doubt, the prophets of Baal thought Elijah was playing to Baal’s strength, so they thought this challenge was to their favor.

The prophets of Baal went first. We read, *“they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made.*

It is at this point that Elijah begins to taunt the prophets of Baal. And when you read what he said to the prophets of Baal, it is rather humorous and you might even get a chuckle out of it. But I don't think he is trying to be funny as much as he is trying to show the utter folly of worshipping Baal as opposed to the living God. In Psalm 2, God has a similar reaction to the kings and rulers who take counsel together against God and his anointed. It says in Psalm 2:4, *“He who sits in the heavens laughs, the LORD holds them in derision.”* What folly it is for man in his pride to stand against the living God.

I think that is what Elijah is communicating through his taunting the prophets of Baal. Their concept of what a god is like pales in comparison to what the true God is like. They worship a God that is crafted by human hands. Carol Kaminski says of this, “We are discovering through the story of Israel that human beings like to worship a god that cannot speak, for it allows them to tell the god what to do, rather than the god telling them what to do.” To which she adds, “It begs the question: who really is god?”⁴ In taunting these prophets, Elijah is actually demonstrating the wide gulf that exists between their impression of a what a “god” is like and the one true God.

So Elijah poses several reasons why Baal may not be hearing the prophets praying to him and why there is no fire coming from heaven at their request. He says in verse 27, *“Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing . . .”* In other words, maybe Baal just happens to have a lot on his mind at the moment. Maybe he is deep in thought or meditating on something and trying to figure out what to do about it. Compare that to the LORD. In Romans 11 we read of God, *“How unsearchable his judgments, his paths are beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?”*

Elijah adds, or maybe *“he is relieving himself.”* I read how one scholar was so offended that this was in the Bible that he would only translate the phrase in Latin just to mask what was being said. But Elijah is saying, perhaps Baal is in the “celestial men's room” and can't come right now. To even suggest something like that for a god is to lower him to the basest level of human existence. Contrast that to the awesome visions of the LORD in Isaiah and Ezekiel where angels never cease saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy!”

“Or he is on a journey . . .” Maybe he is out of town on business somewhere. There were

no I-Phones back then, so maybe he just can't be reached because he is away. But our God *"fills heaven and earth"* and *"there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight."*

"Or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." But imagine the absurdity of worshiping a god who sleeps. In ancient mythology, the gods possessed the weaknesses common to man and sometimes they slept for months, while the world became increasingly unraveled. Yet we read in Psalm 121:4 of our God, *"Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."*

Do you see what is happening here? In this taunt of Elijah there is a stark contrast being made between Baal and the LORD. These gods were gods that were fashioned in the image of man, with weaknesses and struggles common to man. Jeremiah 10:5 says, *"Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good."* So in mocking, Elijah is saying, "you call this a god." But the LORD, Jehovah is so great and so beyond our ability to comprehend we can't even make an image of him because it would degrade and minimize his glory. Look at our God! He knows all things. He is not a body like we are but is spirit. He fills all the universe and there is not an inch where he is not there in all of his being. He never sleeps or is out of touch or daydreams or is caught by surprise. He is the LORD Almighty! We pick up in verse 28, *"And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention."*

Now it was Elijah's turn. In verse 30 we read, *"Then Elijah said to all the people, 'Come near to me.' And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, 'Israel shall be your name,' and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, 'Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.' And he said, 'Do it a second time.' And they did it a second time. And he said, 'Do it a third time.' And they did it a third time. The water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water."*

Then in contrast to the prophets of Baal, rather simply Elijah offered this prayer. "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in

Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” The purpose of this grand display of God’s power was to show that the LORD is God and therefore He is the one we are to follow. Why go on limping between two various opinions if you know who is God?

“Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.” Everything was consumed, including the stones. How intense was the heat? What kind of sound did it make? What was left, just a charred and smoldering hole in the ground? So one hand, you could say that through the fire, the LORD demonstrated that he is the true God. The people recognized this to be true. It says in verse 39, *“And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.”*

But there is something else you need to see with this fire. Hebrews 12:9 says, *“Our God is a consuming fire.”* I think the fire that fell that day was a fire of judgment. Fire is often the symbol of judgment in the Bible. Israel had sinned against God, the one they were in covenant with, the one who delivered them out of Egypt, and the one who created all things. If you want a picture of how God views sin and how strongly he feels about it, look at the intensity of the display of fire. The entire altar was consumed along with anything connected to it. Who can even stand before this holy God?

But at the same time the wonderful mercy of God is in view on the top of this mountain. That fire did not fall on the guilty, but on the substitute, on the sacrifice. The sinful people of Israel were not consumed by that fire that fell from heaven. The sacrifice was consumed. An innocent victim was provided to take the sin and the judgment of the people and for the moment they were spared God’s wrath and judgment.

It reminds us of another mountain where the wrath and mercy of God meet again. If you want a picture of the holy wrath of God and how God views sin, look at the picture of the shriveling remnant of the man Jesus pinned to the cross and hear the anguish of his cry as the sin of the world is placed upon him, *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.”* If you want a picture of the mercy of God and his love for you, look at that same cross, that same man—the Son of God—who took your judgment and made atonement for your sin. Hear his triumphant cry, *“It is finished!”* The Roman soldier at the foot of the cross made a similar confession as the people did at the top of Mount Carmel. Taking in the scene of the cross, he said of Jesus, *“Truly this man was the Son of God.”* So if Jesus is God, Elijah says there is one thing for us to do. Follow him!

Worship Jesus

As we put this sermon into the context of this sermon series CASKET EMPTY we can already conclude that this issue of idolatry is the singular issue at the heart of man. There is a reason why the first of the ten commandments has to do with the worship of God. There is a reason why the first request of the Lord's Prayer is the call to hallow the name of God. It is idolatry that eventually brings an end to the ten tribes to the north. In 2 Kings 17 we read of how the Assyrians come and remove the ten tribes of Israel from the land and the reason for their demise was idolatry. It says in 2 Kings 17 that they *feared other gods* and they *worshiped idols in every place*. God in his grace sent them prophets to call them back to him, but their hearts were hardened.

It is safe to assume that this issue of idolatry is not just an ancient struggle. It is our struggle as well. We are prone to *totter* and *limp* between two opinions. The great theologian, Bruce Springsteen put it this way in one of his songs, "Everybody has a hungry heart." How you try to satisfy that hunger tells you what you worship. Here is the challenge with idolatry. The ways we try to satisfy the hunger of our heart is often unconscious to us. It is often shaped more by our culture than it is a conscious decision. The sobering truth is that if we try to satisfy the hunger of our hearts with the things our culture worships they will eat us alive. Is it money you worship? You will never have enough. Do you worship your body and sexual allure? You will never look good enough and the process of aging will cause you to die a million deaths. Is it the endless quest for entertainment? Life will implode when self is the focus and pleasure is fleeting. Do you worship power? Then you will always try to keep the upper hand and will not know how to love. Do you worship your intellect? Then you live with the fear of being stupid or being a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

Our spiritual bellies are always going to rumble, never satisfied, until we find our rest in Jesus. We learned in Genesis that we were made to know and worship God. We have seen in the story of the Bible to this point that we are prone to worship something other than God. And so we can hear Elijah saying to us this morning, "If Jesus is God, follow him!" But how? It is not just a matter of the mind. Addressing the ways we are prone to limp between the loves of this world and the love of Christ is not just a matter of saying in our minds that Jesus is Lord! Rather, it is a matter of shaping our hearts through what we are doing right now—worship. Through the weekly habit of gathering with God's people to worship and listen to the voice of God and through the daily habit of prayer and reading God's Word and fasting and giving what we have to help others; God shapes and forms our hearts to the heart of Jesus.

“How long will you go on limping between two opinions?” If Jesus is God, follow him! Calibrate your heart this week through the daily worship of him. If you don’t, your heart will be prone to totter towards the unconscious things our culture pursues and loves. Let the habits of faith shape your heart to Jesus this week.

¹A.W. Pink *Elijah* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth, 1985) 122

²Brian Rosner *Greed as Idolatry* quoted in <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/greed-as-idolatry/>

³Kelly M. Kapic “The Cross and the Tomb Belong Together” in *The Cross: 10 Studies for the Easter Season* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 2020) 11

⁴Carol Kaminski *Casket Empty Old Testament Study Guide* (Casket Empty Media, 2012) 131

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is your full name? Why were you given your name? What does your name mean?
2. Share how you relate to the warning of Elijah, *“How long will you go on limping between two opinions?”*

Diving Into The Word

3. Read 1 Kings 12:25-33. What did Jeroboam do and why did he do it? What impact did his actions have on Israel? Reflect on the danger of this statement in verse 33, “in the month that he had devised from his own heart.”
4. Read 1 Kings 18-20-40. Linger in this passage for awhile. What observations do you make? What do you learn about God in this passage? What is God like?
5. Read 2 Kings 17:6-13. This takes place 200 years after Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12. What happened to the northern tribes of Israel? Why? How did God try to get their attention during these 200 years? What do you learn about the patience of God from this story? What do you learn about the judgment of God from this passage?
6. Read Revelation 3:14-22. How do you see the issue of idolatry in this passage? How do you see the idols of our culture (money, looks, entertainment, power, intellect) impacting your life? How do you calibrate your heart to worship God?

Taking It Home

7. What idols do you find yourself “limping” to?
8. What steps do you want to do take this week to calibrate your heart to God?