

In Nomine Iesu

The 10th Sunday after Trinity 2020 The language of faith – 1 Kings 18:16-39

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah. When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. 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. Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. 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." 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." 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. 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." 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.

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. And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

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. 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." 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. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God."

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Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the hope and salvation of Israel. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

It is said that history repeats itself. But it is more accurate to say that because the nature of man has not changed, he – we - continue to fall into the same sins against our Creator and against

those He has created, who share this world with us. We see this in families, with neighbors, in our communities, our nation, and the world. The truth is that the problem of sin is so deep, so imbedded within us all, that only God Himself could solve it. And that, of course, is what the Bible is all about, and that is why God told Abram to leave the land he knew, and go to a strange land, there to prepare the way for Him, who is Your answer to our sin, Jesus Christ.

I

When Abram first built an altar to the Lord at Shechem in the promised land, he was a stranger in a strange land. To put it in modern terms, he was an immigrant. He was from Mesopotamia. He did not speak the language of Canaan's people. But he would learn it soon enough. His son Isaac would grow to manhood speaking it outside the home, even if not in it. Grandson Jacob would be thoroughly immersed in it from infancy onwards. When Jacob, now renamed Israel, moved to Egypt with his sons and daughters-in-law and all his grandchildren, in another time of drought and famine, they all thought of Canaanite as their native language. When Moses began to record the word of God in the language of his people Israel, he naturally wrote in this same language, this language history has come to call Hebrew. For make no mistake, Hebrew as a language is Canaanite.

You know the rest: the long bondage in Egypt, the Passover, the exodus, hearing the voice of God at Sinai, and receiving the tablets of stone and all God's teaching. Before leaving Mt. Sinai, God warned Israel about the inhabitants of Canaan. He said, "Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God)." (Ex 34:12-14)

Now it was 500 years after Moses had led Israel to the land God had promised to them through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There was both spiritual and real drought and famine in the land. God commanded Elijah to confront Israel's king. For Ahab had led Israel away from God, away from the teaching of Moses. On the one hand, Ahab was just following in the footsteps of his unfaithful father, King Omri, who put worldly success and power above all things. But on the other, Ahab was worse than his father. He had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, whose language was Canaanite, Phoenician, in other words, Hebrew, but whose religion was the very paganism God had warned Israel to shun and reject. With this, Ahab established a covenant with the pagan Canaanites. This is exactly what God had forbidden, and it caused the conflict between Ahab and Elijah.

It is no wonder Jezebel hated Elijah. She indeed spoke the language of Israel, but she did not speak the language of faith. Jezebel understood what Elijah said from the moment she met him, and recognized perfectly that he condemned the religion she inherited from her father. Rather than learn than learn the language of faith, she blended her religion with that of Israel, so they would forget the language of faith.

By marrying Jezebel Ahab openly and publicly defied the God of Israel, setting an example of unfaithfulness that no one in Israel could possibly misunderstand. For that reason God commanded Elijah to publicly challenge the gods of Jezebel and so draw Israel's attention back to God's words of warning, and show them how destructive was the way Ahab and Jezebel had led them into.

God had warned Israel not to be drawn into the religion of the people whose land they would possess. They were to worship Him in the way Moses commanded them: "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them." (De 5:1) A little later Moses added, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you this day shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when

you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” (De 6:4-6) Israel was to be a special people, both hearing the word of God, and speaking the language of faith in all things.

II

When Elijah, together with the priests of Ahab and Jezebel reached Mt. Carmel, he told them to prepare a sacrifice: one bull, sufficient wood, and then call upon Baal to ignite the wood, and so prove that he was God. All that morning the 450 priests of Baal cried out, “Oh Baal, answer us,” even cutting themselves until they bled, in order to gain their his attention. At noon Elijah began to mock them. Let me paraphrase what he said: “Cry louder, maybe he is still thinking or maybe he is busy. Cry out, maybe he has gone out for a walk or, wait, I know, maybe he is sleeping, and needs someone to wake him up!” All this went on until evening with no result whatever. King Ahab must have been in a foul mood as the 450 priests who ate at his table continued to cry out to a god who did not exist.

As you know, when Elijah called out to the God of Israel, it was quite different. He answered. It was just as Moses had said, “What great nation is there that has God so near to it, **as the LORD our God is to us**, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? (De 4:7) Indeed what nation had a God who promised His people, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you.” (Psalm 50:15) That day at Mount Carmel, He delivered Elijah in a most spectacular way.

Before returning to Elijah and the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, let us note as the school year nears that parents all over this nation are anxious about their children. They worry about their physical well-being in the face of COVID-19. They worry about their psychological well-being from the effects of forced isolation and the thought of more remote learning. They worry about their spiritual well-being in the midst of a society that looks uncomfortably like the society of Ahab and Jezebel that Elijah tried to warn and enlighten. Parents are right to be concerned about all of these things. We all should be concerned about these things.

So then, consider Elijah. He did not face COVID-19, but he did face something far worse, drought and famine, from which thousands died. He also faced loneliness and isolation, for the king actively sought to kill him. And he faced a confused and doubting populace, who more and more rejected the God Elijah served in order to seek solutions to their problems in things where they could not be found, including in the trendy religion of the Canaanites. Finally, Elijah was called to publicly face down the king himself and all the priests of Baal - at no small danger to himself.

What did he do? He called upon the name of the Lord. He called upon the name of the gracious and merciful God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who keeps all of His promises, especially the biggest one, that is, to solve the problem of sin for all the world. Dear friends, God in His word continues to teach you today, as He taught Elijah, to speak the language of His people, His true Israel. He teaches you in sermons and hymns, in the catechism and Bible study to trust His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, and to call upon His name in full confidence that He answers prayer, and delivers. As we are about to begin a new year of teaching and preaching, consider these things.

We said at the beginning that history really does not repeat itself, but because man, you and I, remain the same, fallen and sinful creatures, we fall into all the same sins and troubles people have always fallen into. That is why today’s America looks uncomfortably similar to King Ahab’s Israel. For we as a nation have been busy squandering our great heritage of faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What then shall we do?

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Dear friends, believe as Elijah believed, for he too trusted in the promised Savior from sin. He knew the Christ by faith. That is why not that day on Mt. Carmel, but later, much later, on the Mount of Transfiguration, both he and Moses stood with Jesus Christ, conversing as old friends, who knew each other well, to the amazement of Peter, James, and John. For, you see, in Christ God has given the solution to the problem of sin, in whatever form it takes, sickness, loneliness,

doubt, fear, even death, to the world. He promised His Old Testament people a Savior from sin, and He has given us that promised Savior in the New Testament. In Christ there is forgiveness of all sins, life, and salvation. In Christ we see the perfect righteousness that is ours by faith, and so we learn to speak the language of faith to God. He learn to call on the God of grace for mercy. And He hears! He answers! This is what Elijah knew and believed. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria