

Elijah vs. the Prophets of Baal – May 29, 2016

1 Kings 18:20-39

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I want to call this story about Elijah vs. the Prophets of Baal the “nanny nanny booboo” story. Seriously. It comes across as some type of schoolyard challenge where each side cries out, “My god’s better than your god.”

Now, it would probably be helpful to have a little backstory to put this into context for you. Ahab is the current ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel. He took for his wife a Phoenician princess named Jezebel. The arranged marriage was a strong political alliance for both kingdoms. When Jezebel settled in Israel she brought with her her foreign gods, and as the queen, she wanted people to worship them. Ahab acquiesced and allowed her to promote her gods along with the worship of the Yahweh, the God of Israel. What harm could it do? I mean, let’s just cover all the bases here. Multiple gods have to be better than one god, right?

But here’s the problem. If we take a look at the 10 Commandments, number one is “You shall have no other gods before me.” Just one. Me. The only God, the true God.

So God sent the prophet Elijah to do what prophets do – preach the word of God, admonish the people of Israel to stop their sinning, repent, and turn back to God. Ahab and Jezebel were not fans of Elijah. Ahab accused Elijah of causing the three-year drought that was drying up the land and keeping crops from growing. Baal was the god of storms, so he must mad about something to have held back the rain for so long. Elijah accused Ahab of being the cause of the drought because he had turned away from the God of Israel.

Elijah instructed Ahab to gather the people of Israel along with the prophets of the foreign gods to come together for an assembly on Mt Carmel. Elijah challenged the people to make a choice. Either follow God or follow Baal. You can’t do both. He wanted them to make a decision but no one spoke up.

Then Elijah proposed a little competition, between him and the prophets of Baal. And you heard the story. The prophets of Baal cried out to their god for hours, and even cut themselves to try to get his attention, to no avail. Throughout this time Elijah taunted and mocked them, provoking to call out louder, because maybe their god was asleep or had taken a walk or was off meditating somewhere.

Finally they gave up. Elijah called the people of Israel to gather closer, and he began to prepare his altar. To make things more interesting he even called on the people to pour water over the logs, soaking them. Elijah called out to the God of Israel, and God answered, sending fire to consumed the wood, the bull, and even the water. The people were stunned and fell on their

faces to worship God, and God alone. Then Elijah called upon the people to seize the prophets of Baal and slaughter them.

There are a few things that bother us about this story in light of what we know about God through Jesus Christ, not the least of which is the slaughter of 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah. The extremism and violence turn us off, and we wonder if there is anything we can take from it.

But what this story tells us is that God is faithful. We may understand it in a less bloody way, but the bottom line is, God is God, and anything set up in a place in our lives that demands our worship is an idol that competes for our full devotion to God. And in the end, when called upon, no matter how much we beg and plead, the idol or false god will never measure up.

And I think what Elijah says to the people of Israel before the contest begins, is a valid question for any of us. How long are we going to go limping along with two differing opinions? Other God is God, or the other thing, the idol, is our god. The problem is, when we try to put both on the same level, when we divide our focus between God and something less than God, we do in fact, limp along. This is an interesting image, limping along. When we divide our focus, not giving our full energy to following God in our lives, then we are less. We are not functioning at a level of wholeness that we could have if our energies weren't divided. Putting anything ahead of God in our lives keeps us from being our true selves, the self that we were created and called to be.

Here's an example. In the Star Wars series of movies, we know that Darth Vader is the bad guy. He is the villain. But Darth Vader didn't start out that way. Early in his training to be a Jedi Knight, to live for and uphold the side of goodness and wholeness, he learned from his mentors that Jedi's are not allowed to have love relationships. To be a Jedi required complete focus, because of the incredible power that they could wield, and anything that might disrupt that focus could lead to some serious consequences. Jedi's relied on the Force for their power. The Force was dualistic power in the universe, having a light side and dark side. The Force was everywhere. The Jedi Knights lived to promote the light side, the side of goodness, fairness, justice, and compassion.

Well the young Jedi, Anakin Skywalker, didn't always listen to his Jedi mentors, and he had a secret relationship with a woman he dearly loved, to the point of obsession. When he had a vision that his new wife was going to die in childbirth, he was overwhelmed with anxiety. He learned from a trusted but evil mentor that he could save Padme's life, but it would require him to learn about the dark side of the Force. Despite his training, despite what he knew was right, his love for Padme and his fear of losing her, allowed him to succumb to the dark side. With his loyalty divided between what he knew was right and with his desire to save his wife, no matter the cost, Anakin chose the path of darkness and became Darth Vader and unleashed his villainy.

Now that's an extreme example, and I doubt our choices about what we put first in our lives will have such dire consequences for the universe. But the point is, what we put first, what we prioritize in our life will become our god. Like Elijah said to the people of Israel, you can't have both. When Elijah asked them flat out to choose God or to choose Baal, the people of Israel did not respond. They remained silent. But by not choosing, by continuing to try follow both, they had actually chosen to follow Baal, to follow the idol. With God there is no room for sitting on the fence and not making a choice. Because there can only be one God, and no idol on this earth, can ever measure up.