

Two Paths, One Option

In the name of the Son who sets us free indeed: The text for this morning's message is 1 Kings, Chapter 18, the 21st verse: *Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go on limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him." And the people answered him not a word.*

Dear friends in Christ: I'm sure many of you recognize the passage I just read. It comes from the episode in which the prophet Elijah challenged 450 prophets of the Canaanite false god, Baal, to a theological show down at Mount Carmel. The lines were clearly drawn. On one side was Elijah. He stood alone. And he insisted that there is only one God: the Lord, who created and sustains all things, and who will not share his glory with another. On the other side were the prophets of Baal. They were more open-minded. For them, Baal was just one of many gods. To be sure, he was the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon (roughly equivalent to Zeus in the Greek religious system); but in their view there were lots of other gods and goddesses to worship and to whom one might appeal for favors. And most of these prophets would've been willing to grant that the Lord God of Israel was one of these lesser gods. Their problem with Elijah was his insistence that the Lord was the *only* God. *That* they could not tolerate. And neither could waffling King Ahab of Israel and his wicked Queen, Jezebel. They had outlawed prophets like Elijah, and had put to death many. So the two sides of the theological conflict were clear – even if uneven. I mean, if it had been a democratic thing, obviously Elijah's side had already lost. Four hundred fifty to one is no contest.

But we would be wrong to see this merely as a contest between Elijah and his opponents. The real battle was for the hearts and minds of the people of Israel. You see, on one hand, the Israelites liked the idea of being the Lord's chosen people. The stories of God's dealings with the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God's mighty power revealed as he delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, the wilderness wanderings with Moses, the Law given at Mount Sinai, the conquest of the land under Joshua, the Judges Gideon, Samson, and the others, the nation at its peak under the reigns of David and Solomon – all this was part of their history. It shaped them and defined who they were as a people and a nation. They liked the idea of their special covenant relationship with the Lord. They didn't want to let that go. But on the other hand, the Canaanite religion practiced by all the surrounding nations was very enticing. It too appealed to them. So their attitude was, "Why do we have to pick one or the other? Why can't we have both?" They didn't want their spirituality to be so black and white. They wanted it to be shades of gray. They wanted to be able to worship the Lord *and* Baal. So you'll note that when Elijah lays down his challenge, it isn't to the prophets of Baal. No, it's to the people of God. He's telling them, you can't have it both ways. These are two completely different paths. You can't go in two directions at the same time. You have to choose one or the other.

And in response to the prophet's demand that they make up their minds, the people are silent. They don't want to be forced to make a choice one way or the other. They would prefer to maintain the status quo, and continue to do what Elijah called, "limping along between two different opinions".

Why is that? What was it about the false Canaanite religion that attracted them so much that they were unwilling to give it up? The answer is twofold. First was its overt sensuality. It was, after all, a fertility cult that encouraged people to participate in a lot of sexually immoral

practices that the Lord God had expressly prohibited: adultery, fornication, prostitution, and homosexuality to name but a few. So there was that: it appealed to their baser instincts. But even more significantly, the Canaanite religion centered in the basic notion that man, through his actions, could manipulate the gods. If you follow a certain set of procedures, the gods will do this in response. If you say the right words and incantations, the gods will bless you in these ways. If you offer the right sacrifices, the gods will reward you in kind. In short, if you do this for the gods, the gods will do that for you.

Do you see what this is? It's a religion that imagines the gods are like genies in a lamp. If you rub it the right way, out pops the genie and grants you your wishes. Or it presents the gods as corrupt politicians: with the right bribes you can buy their favor and they'll do what you want them to. But let me ask you, with this kind of religion, who's really in charge? If the gods are at my beck and call, if I can manipulate their behavior by what I do, who's in the driver's seat? Why, I am of course. And if I can control the gods, what does that make me if not a god in my own right? You see, *this* is the main appeal of the Canaanite religion: it allows every person to be master over the gods. It places *you* at the head of the pantheon. It lets you define what's right and what's wrong. And I'll tell you something else: it's not just the Canaanite religion that does this. This is the basis of every false religion. They make gods of men, and the gods into men's slaves. And that's why people are so attracted to such false faiths.

But like Elijah on Mount Carmel, the Lord God of Israel stands alone. He doesn't fit the mold of other gods, which are merely the product of men's imaginations. No, the Lord who created the heavens and earth is in every way above and beyond the minds and thoughts of men. He alone defines what is good and what is evil. And he cannot and will not be manipulated by the actions of men – and most especially not by the actions of sinful men who, because they're sinners, can do nothing to please him or earn his favor anyway. It is an affront to him to imagine that you can. The true God remains a *true God*: one who is over all things, who controls all things, and to whom we, his creatures, are to look to in hope and faith to receive all things that we need – not because he's obligated by our actions to give us anything; but rather because in his love and mercy he delights in showing us his favor and giving us what we need.

He's exactly the opposite of the false gods. His favor is not for sale. We cannot earn it by what we do. Instead he gives it to us freely. He gives us all things by his *grace* – which is *unmerited* favor. He provides what we need because he is good; not because we are. He doesn't want you to *do* anything for him. You can't. He wants you to trust him to do all things for you. He says, "Believe in me, believe my promises, and trust me to take care of you." As we said in the Psalm, "God is our refuge and strength ... Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way." With a God like that, you have nothing to fear – ever. That's what having the true God is all about.

We see this chiefly in the plan of salvation that he's prepared for us. When we were lost, rebels with respect to the Lord, the prisoners of sin and death, and unable to save ourselves, the Lord in his mercy sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to take upon himself our fallen flesh and go to the cross where he offered himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. By this sacrifice and his subsequent resurrection he earned for us forgiveness, freedom, and everlasting life. Our part in this great plan? Zero. Nothing. Nada. It's his gift to you; a gift which is received by grace through faith – faith that he gives you by the power of his Spirit when the good news of this salvation is proclaimed to you. It's *all* his doing. You deserve none of it. But because it's his doing, you can trust in it absolutely. If it were in any way dependent upon you or your good works, thoughts, or intentions – things you had to do for him – you'd always be left wondering if

you'd done enough. You'd be a prisoner of fear, fretting that if you failed to do this or that to please the Lord, or failed to do whatever it was well enough, then he'd cast you headlong into the flames of hell forever.

Elijah demanded that the people choose which they would follow: an imaginary god whose religion encouraged sinful behavior and who could be manipulated by human actions – thus ultimately leaving sinful humans the lords of all things and the masters of their eternal destinies (which is problematic at best); or the Lord, the true God, who deals with sinful humans in his mercy and love, who bestows on them his grace and favor, and who alone does all that is necessary to forgive them of their sins and grant them eternal life. The difference between the two is like night and day. It would seem to be an easy decision to make. But as we've already seen, the people didn't want to make that decision. They wanted to keep walking on both paths at the same time – which is impossible, of course.

And this has been the problem with God's people all along. Not necessarily that they worship false gods like Baal alongside of the true God like they were in the days of Elijah; that would be very obvious. No, but rather by thinking that they can earn the favor of the true God by their actions, they treat the Lord as if he were one of the false gods. Thus, even while appearing to worship the Lord, by their wrong-headed approach, they've turned him into a false god like Baal.

Consider Cain and Abel: both brought offerings to the Lord. Abel's offering was accepted and Cain's was rejected; but why? It's because Cain thought he could earn the favor of God by bringing him a gift – a sacrifice of grain that represented his hard work and desire to please the Lord. That's not possible. It's an insult to the Lord for a sinner even to think such a thing. Abel understood that. He knew he was a sinner. He knew that there was nothing he could do to please the Lord. He knew he deserved to die for his sin. So he offered a lamb – an animal to die in his place – trusting that the Lord in his mercy would forgive him by grace as he had promised. And the Lord kept his Word.

Consider the Pharisees at the time of Christ. They too wanted to please the Lord by their actions. And so they came up with thousands of rules and traditions by which they believed that the Lord would look upon their efforts and smile – and reward them accordingly. In other words, they turned the Lord into a false god like Baal. Theirs was a false religion and a false hope, and Jesus told them so. And angry and resentful like Cain who killed Abel, so also the Pharisees and their allies killed Jesus. In so doing, they inadvertently helped fulfill the mission of Jesus to be God's perfect lamb of sacrifice to take away the sins of the world. Sadly, most of them never came to understand or to believe that. But by God's grace some did: like the Apostle Paul whom we heard in today's Epistle declaring the great charter of our faith: that one is saved by grace through faith in Christ's sacrifice apart from the works of the Law.

Consider the western church at the time of the Reformation. The same thing had happened again: the vast majority of the people who claimed the name of Christ were in fact worshipping a false god – one whose favor could be purchased by a long list of duties. Why, you could go on a pilgrimage to various sacred sites, you could take a vow of chastity and join a convent or monastery, you could buy an indulgence or mindlessly repeat certain prayers, you could venerate the remains of certain people the church had declared to be saints; there were a thousand ways to do it; but it all amounted to the same thing: turning your trust away from the true God and the forgiveness and salvation he gives as a gift by grace through faith in Christ, to a false god whose favor depended on what you did for him.

This is the reason we celebrate Reformation Day. Today we give thanks to God for his grace in raising up yet another bold Elijah, Martin Luther of blessed memory, who stood (initially, at least) alone against the many prophets of Baal in his day, and against the kings and emperors who supported them. He called to people who were enslaved in that false religion of works and said, "How long will you go on limping along between two opinions? Either you trust in God's grace through faith in Christ for salvation, or you are placing your trust in your works to please a god who in fact does not exist. You cannot follow both the Lord and Baal. They are two entirely different paths. You can only follow one or the other. Which will it be?"

By God's grace, we are the theological heirs of the Reformation. And so we will be, as long as we continue to confess the faith of Luther and those who joined him in stressing God's grace alone, through faith alone, in what Christ alone accomplished for our salvation. And with this in mind, a word of warning is in order even (and perhaps especially) for us. For each of us individually, and for whole groups of us collectively, the same two paths always lie before us. And because of the weakness of our flesh and the perpetual desire we have to think more highly of ourselves than we ought, the temptation is always there to believe that there is something in us, something that we can do or aspire to, that will earn for us the favor and blessing of the Lord. You hear it when people say that the Christian faith ought to be less about creeds and more about deeds; or when they say it's not doctrine that counts, what really matters is how you live your life as a disciple of Christ. These statements and others like them may be well intentioned; but they're wrong, because what they are saying is it's not what you believe about the Lord and what he's done to secure your salvation that matters, rather it's what you do to show him your loyalty and devotion that does. People who are deceived by such noble sounding ideas distort the truth of the Gospel and ascribe to the Lord the attributes of a false god like Baal.

Let's not fall for this, now or ever. And let's not, like the Israelites, stand silently on the sidelines while these battles are being fought in the church of our day. Let's not be double-minded, trying to follow two paths at once. But instead, let us boldly and with firm conviction take our stand with the Lord, on his truth, and his grace and forgiveness in Christ; for this is our life and salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!