

Elijah!
1 Kings 18, selected verses
November 5, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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Last summer I told you some great stories about the prophet Elijah, culminating in his ascension into heaven on a fiery chariot. That story is the basis for the spiritual hymn “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” You may remember that in the middle of that sermon, I left out a really juicy part of the story, and I said I was saving that part for the fall. Well, today is the day! The choir just sang a great anthem about it. So, let’s back up and recall the beginning of the story. See if it sounds familiar. And I promise that today I’ll fill in all the juicy bits.

This story is set in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, roughly 850 years before Jesus was born. The main characters are King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and the prophet Elijah. You can tell from the names who the bad guys are, right?

King Ahab is officially a worshiper of the Lord, the one true God of Israel, but he’s wishy washy about it. It is almost like he is just going through the motions. Jezebel, the queen, is a Phoenician princess, and she worships the Canaanite god Ba’al. To please her, King Ahab not only allows her to worship Ba’al privately, but he even sets up altars in high places all around Israel, altars to Ba’al, the god of storms and fertility, and to Asherah, the goddess of fertility, so that not only Jezebel but ALL the people may choose to worship them. Queen Jezebel imports hundreds of prophets to the god Ba’al, and she even begins to have the prophets of the Lord killed. So, God calls the prophet Elijah to confront Ahab and to set Israel back on the straight and narrow.

When God first sends Elijah to meet King Ahab, there is a terrible drought in the land. It has been going on for years, and the people and animals are really suffering. Naturally, in circumstances like these, some of the people would want to turn to Ba’al, the Canaanite god of storms and fertility, hoping for a little rain. But God sends Elijah to issue a challenge to the prophets of Ba’al to show all the people who is really in charge of the weather, who is truly the author of life. Now we come to the part of the story that I left out last summer. And here I am adapting *The Message*, a modern-language version of the Bible:

The moment Ahab sees Elijah he says, “You old troublemaker!” Elijah answers, “It is not me who has caused trouble in Israel, but you —you have stopped following the LORD’s commands and have run off after the local gods. Therefore, have everyone in Israel assemble before me at Mount Carmel, including the 450 prophets of Ba’al, and the 400 prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel’s table.” Amazingly, King Ahab does what Elijah says. The king summons everyone in Israel, including the prophets, to Mount Carmel, and Elijah challenges the people: “How long are you going to sit on the fence? If the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is the real God, then follow the Lord; if Ba’al is the real God, follow Ba’al. Make up your minds!” But nobody says a word; nobody moves.

Then Elijah says, “I am the only prophet of the LORD left in Israel; and there are 450 prophets of Ba’al. So, let those prophets bring two oxen; let them pick one ox, butcher it, and lay it out on an altar on firewood—but don’t light the fire. I’ll take the other ox, cut it up, and lay it on the wood, and I won’t light the fire either. Then you pray to your gods, and I will pray to the LORD. The god who answers with fire is the real God.”

So, the prophets of Ba’al take an ox, prepare it for the altar, and then pray to Ba’al. They pray all morning long, “O Ba’al, answer us!” But there is no voice, no answer from Ba’al. Desperate, they limp around the altar. By noon, Elijah starts making fun of them, taunting, “Call a little louder—he is a god, after all. Maybe he’s off meditating somewhere or other, or maybe he’s gotten involved in a project, or maybe he’s on vacation. You don’t suppose he’s overslept, do you, and needs to be waked up?” The prophets of Ba’al pray louder and louder, cutting themselves with swords and knives until they are covered with blood. This goes on until well past noon. They use every trick they know to make something happen on the altar, but nothing happens—there is no voice, no answer, no response from Ba’al.

Then Elijah tells the people, “Enough! It’s my turn. Gather around.” And they gather. First Elijah rebuilds the altar of the Lord, that Queen Jezebel had destroyed, laying stone on stone until it is rebuilt. Then Elijah digs a wide trench around the altar. He lays firewood on the altar, cuts up the ox, puts it on the wood, and says, “Fill four buckets with water and

drench both the ox and the firewood.” Then he says, “Do it again,” Then Elijah says, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time. The altar is drenched and the trench around the altar is filled with water. How would it possibly start on fire?

When it is time for the sacrifice to be offered, Elijah the prophet comes to the altar and prays, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, make it known right now that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I am here at your command. Answer me, O Lord; answer me and reveal to these people that you are GOD, the true God, and that you are giving these people another chance at repentance.” And BAM!! The fire of GOD falls on the altar and burns up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dirt, and even the water in the trench.

All the people see it happen and they fall on their faces in worship, exclaiming, “The LORD is the true God!” Elijah tells them, “Grab the prophets of Baal! Don’t let one get away!” So, the people grab those prophets, and ... um ... it does not end well for them.

Then Elijah says to King Ahab, “Eat and drink—celebrate! The rain you have been waiting for is on the way; I hear it coming.” So, Ahab sits down to a nice picnic, and Elijah climbs to the very top of Mt. Carmel, bows deeply in prayer, his face between his knees. Then he says to his young servant, “On your feet now! Look toward the sea.” The servant goes and looks and doesn’t see anything. “Keep looking,” says Elijah. And sure enough, eventually the servant says, “I see a cloud! But very small, no bigger than someone’s hand, rising out of the sea.”

Elijah responds, “Quickly then, on your way. Tell King Ahab, ‘Harness your chariot and get down the mountain now, back to the capital city, before the rain stops you.’” Suddenly, the sky grows black, and then there is a huge cloudburst, and King Ahab is hightailing it down the mountain in his chariot. Then the LORD gives Elijah superhuman strength, and he runs in front of Ahab’s chariot all the way to the capital.

So, Elijah demonstrates God’s mighty power and proves that Ba’al is a false god. God uses Elijah to save Israel from drought and starvation, but in the process, Elijah makes a lifelong enemy of Queen Jezebel, whose prophets he has shown to be false. And the hatred she feels toward Elijah shapes the whole rest of his life here on earth.

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When I read an Old Testament story like this, with a larger-than-life character like Elijah, my first question is, “What is this story trying to tell us about God?” For this story, and many stories in the Hebrew scriptures, the obvious answer, the straight-forward answer, is that the Lord is God and Ba’al is not. The God who made heaven and earth; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the one who brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land – THIS God is the one who has earned our worship and our obedience. Anything else you might be tempted to rely on in this life is a false god, ineffectual, powerless, unable to send the life-saving rain, unable even to light a small fire.

The Almighty God is the one we call on when our backs are against the wall, when the storm is coming. I have prayed those prayers myself. But it only takes a few minutes of watching the news these days to be reminded that many people pray to Almighty God for miracles and don’t get them. How are we to believe in God’s might in the face of all the darkness in our world? How are we to handle our yearning for a God who is capable of setting things right when we live in a world that is clearly not right at all?

The answer the scriptures offer is not the easy answer we seek. They say, In dark and dangerous times, worship God anyway. In the face of great loss, trust God anyway. If the great storm is coming, follow God’s commandments anyway. Wait for the Lord. Take heart. Be strong. God’s ways are not our ways, and God is not ours to command. God is not in our pocket. No, we are in the palm of God’s hand. God is God, and we are not, and – while we are permitted to approach God – we should come with reverence and awe before the Lord, offering praise to the Creator of heaven and earth, and giving thanks to the God who has guided us our whole lives long.

Thanks be to God!

Amen