

Text: 1 Kings 18:12, 17-40

Theme: Series-Elijah, a Man like You and Me: The God who Answers by Fire

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Morning Prayer Service on 05/10/2014 at 10.30am

Introduction (Recap from 1 Kings 17)

First, God gave Elijah the courage to confront Ahab and announce a drought. Following closely on the heels of that announcement, God told Elijah to do an incredible thing: **He** was not to stay before the public; instead, he was to run and hide by the brook Cherith. While there, he was to be fed by the ravens twice a day, and he was to draw his water from the brook - which later dried up. At Cherith, for an undisclosed period of time, Elijah simply waited on God in the solitude of obscurity.

God fed him using a raven - a bird that was not considered clean.

Each day the water was a little lower. At first, it was probably not too noticeable, but eventually it became very discernible. The water level was dropping. The drought was working. Hallelujah! Well maybe not. How do you think Elijah felt? Every day he looked and wondered and waited. He was living by a drying brook.

Have you ever lived by a drying brook? It may be a drying brook of physical ability as we get older. The knees just don't work like they used to. We all do that. But some are having to battle cancer, diabetes, heart problems, Alzheimer's, and other debilitating conditions. Life is not as pleasant as it used to be. Some are living by a drying brook of finances. We have jobs and some are facing disaster in this economy. Even those who are not directly involved will probably have some spin-off repercussions. Many, if not all of us, will have to endure this. Will it ever be good again? We cannot tell. We are there, every day, looking at the drying brook.

Next, God sent Elijah to Zarephath - a considerable distance in the plain when a price tag was on his head. He had to trust God to protect him and to Zarephath he must go. When he got there, he found a widow and her child on the verge of starvation. At God's direction, Elijah moved in with them. Elijah said to the widow, in effect, "We will trust God on a day-by-day basis," And, sure enough, God came through day after day (as He always does). The flour bin was never empty, and the little jar of oil never ran dry. Each and every day God provided for their needs.

And thus, it was that in this context of hiding and testing, "after these things," Elijah faced another impossible situation. But there is difference. By now, Elijah has become accustomed to facing the impossible. His faith has matured. He's ready for the next test, confident in His God. **A DEATH IN THE FAMILY.**

We don't see how we could walk any closer, but still more tests come, one on top of another. That's where Elijah is, but he doesn't waver. He stands tall and silent in the shadow of God, grounded in faith, confident of his Lord's power. That's humility at its best.

He doesn't question God. He doesn't fall apart at the seams. He doesn't lose control. He doesn't argue with the woman. He simply says, with quiet compassion, "Give me the boy."

Elijah may have been silent before the woman, but not before God. It is before God that he raises his tough questions. "Lord, what are You doing? What are You trying to

tell me? Why would You break the heart of this dear mother? I've obeyed You. I've waited upon You. I've urged her to wait upon You. And now this? This situation is beyond me; I can't seem to get above it. I can't get relief from it. Lord, what are You doing? What do You *mean* by this? All alone in the shadow of God ... that's where we fight such battles. Elijah is able to be completely candid with his God because he's developed such familiarity over time in his own private place of struggle-in his own spiritual haven.

If you were Elijah, conscious of the fact that God was training him to be totally dependent on him, a thought may flash through your mind to ask: What next? Will I be able to go through with it? But remember 1 Corinth 10:13: "No temptation has seized you except that which is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

1 Kings 18: 12, 17-40

In the past, Elijah's test was before no audience. Now God is moving him to a stage where he has to learn to trust God in the presence of over one thousand formidable enemies.

Everything in the Elijah narrative has been moving towards this encounter in 1 Kings 18. The political leader and the spiritual leader have gathered with the people on the mountain to settle the age-old question: **"Who is God?" Is "Yahweh", the covenant Lord, the true God of heaven and earth? Or is "Baal", the fertility god of the pagan nations around Israel, the Lord of heaven and earth?**

Elijah frames the essential question of the day in verse 21 where he says, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." In some translations the word "waver" is translated as "limp". "How long will you go on 'limping' between two opinions?"

Today we live in a time when every "ism," sect, and religion which comes down the pike offers a "new God" to us. Some people feel they must sample them all. So, we have the Eastern religions, new age, humanism, secularism, and a plethora of strange sects, all promoting their own private brand of God. **A lady told me recently, "I've finally worked out a theology about God all on my own. It leaves me lots of options and plenty of leeway, it makes no demands and carries no judgment, and best of all, it feels good. What do you think of that?" The truth is that she is not a lot different from what everyone else does who opts for a god other than the God shown to us in the Bible.**

And that God is revealed clearly to us in the person of his only Son. Luther was right on target when he said, "I know of no other God except the God whom I see in my Lord Jesus Christ." We are only kidding ourselves if we think we can opt for a convenient "God of the hour" – a God whose Words and Holiness can be fine-tuned to blend with the culture and permissiveness of the 21st Century!

God's word warns that all such choices, other than the true God, are apostasy. Apostasy is deserting the Lord God, becoming faithless to him, and abandoning the faith of our fathers. That is exactly what the nation of Israel had done, and now God is calling them back to making a definite choice. God clearly punishes apostasy. He will be God of all or God not at all. Actually, the Israelites had settled for syncretism. They sought to simply combine and reconcile the different beliefs: a little of the Hebrew God and a little of the pagan gods, mix them according to personal taste, and worship the result. But Elijah said, "No way!" God is an exclusive God, he knows that all other gods are worthless.

The Prophet Elijah faced enormous odds. He and his God had been rejected in favour of the 450 prophets of Baal. Yet, in spite of these odds, Elijah challenged the Baal and his prophets to a contest with God (1 Kings 18:16-40). In this showdown, Elijah poses the question of all questions which is the basis of my reflection. 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' The people did not answer him a word" (1 Kings 18:21). Keep in mind that many years earlier the people of Israel had entered gladly into a covenant with the Lord. In the book of Joshua, chapter 24, we hear the people say, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! ... We too will serve the Lord because he is our God." **On that day the people were not lost for an answer. But in this passage (1 Kings 18) the people gave no answer. Their silence is, in a sense, so loud that it is indicative of their guilt it (verse 21).**

This question forms the broader contours of our crucible of faith. How long shall we limp with two opinions? How long shall we waver between what God is and what Baal is? How long shall we ride the crests of doubt and uncertainty, playing mind games and Russian roulette in the things of God?

Elijah asks the question because he knows there remains lingering doubt among the people about God's power and majesty. He knows their volatility and vulnerability. He knows they still limp, that they have not yet made up their minds because they are confused about which God is which. He knows the people cannot yet walk with the brisk, unfaltering stride of absolute faith and confidence in the God of Israel. Like Jacob, their stride has been broken. They are limping on the plains of despair, doubt and uncertainty. **They are bemused and confused by the god of Baal; the god of fertility and storm; a god of the winds, fires, and rains; a god of the natural, cosmic elements.** Unlike Jacob, their limp is a symbol of doubt rather than the mark of a new identity.

They have forgotten the God of Israel who has directed their paths; a God with whom they have forged a personal relationship; a God of the Exodus and the Jordan; a God who brought them into a new deal in a new land; a God who brought them through the desert, quarried waters from a rock, and set rainbows and clouds in arid desert oases. The people have forgotten about that God who brought them through, who kept them from annihilation by their enemies and vouched their safe passage through many dangers, toils, and snares. How quickly the people forget!

At issue in the people's silence before the prophet is that they have forgotten their "first love," something the Lord accused the Ephesian church of as well (Rev. 2:4). They have forgotten the Lord and their covenant relationship with him.

As the story moves on in verses 22-24, Elijah sets up a challenge between the Lord and Baal. The God who answers with fire is the true God. At this suggestion, the people finally give an answer to the prophet. In verse 24 it says literally, "And all the people answered, 'What you say is good.'" But behind this answer we know that it is the living and active Word of the Lord which forces the issue forward. "Who is God?" What follows in verses 25-29 is the liturgy of the prophets of Baal, and in verses 30-37 the liturgy of Elijah.

In comparing the two liturgies we see the importance of liturgy and how we approach our God.

The worship and liturgy of the prophets of Baal is a glimpse at the ridiculous. The text wants us to see this. It's a humorous look into pagan ritual as the people shout and dance, cut themselves with knives and prophecy - all to no avail. The middle of verse 26 says, "But there was no response; no one answered." Elijah taunts them in verse 27, "Shout louder! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." You would think this taunting would be ignored by Baal's people, but they add to

their foolishness and do what Elijah says! For hours, this ridiculous liturgy of shouting, dancing, and cutting goes on, but verse 29 ends it by saying, "But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention." How sad. A threefold "nothing" is all that happens. No response, no answer, no attention! If it was simply a matter of sincerity, these prophets of Baal would not have been found wanting. They are sincere in their worship, but they were sincerely wrong.

In contrast, when we look at the liturgy of Elijah in verses 30-37 we find a very different approach. How does it begin? It begins with an invitation to the people. "Come here to me," Elijah says. And the people come. Who do they come to? Elijah, to be sure, but more than that, they come to the one in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells and through whom the Word of the Lord is spoken. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Now, watch or listen closely. After inviting the people to come forward, Elijah begins to rebuild the altar of the Lord. All the action slows down in our text as we read about this ritual in verses 30-35. We approach God on God's terms, not our own. Before the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the sacrifices of God's people in the Old Testament were done in such a way that they were in accordance to his Word.

I want you to catch a glimpse of the spiritual peaks that jut from the clouds of this dark setting. A few that comes to mind now are:

- There is a desperate need for spiritual heroes who will stand against the tide of heresy and apostasy.
- There is a need for the people of God to gage their allegiance to the Lord and to determine where we really stand when it comes to being on the Lord's side.
- There must be a willingness to flee the evil that surrounds us and be a separate people for the glory of the Lord.
- There must be a willingness to renew our commitment to the Lord and place Him above all other pursuits, interests and loyalties.

With all this in mind, let's join Elijah and consider the Showdown on Mount Carmel.

V. 21-24 The Dilemma of the People of God

These people had fallen a long way from the nation that had entered and conquered Canaan hundreds of years before. Now they are a politically divided and apostate nation.

Can we be honest and say that the same is true for the church of our generation? Whether we like to admit it or not, the visible church is in the midst of apostasy and waywardness. However, the Lord said that things would be this way, 2 Thess. 2:3. (Also see - 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-3; 2 Tim. 4:3-4)

When we see denominations and churches turn from the proclamation of the truth and see them begin to produce error, as they subject the Scriptures to modern day culture of godlessness and trample underfoot the authority of God. When we see these kinds of things beginning to take place, isn't it plain to see that we are living in an age similar to Elijah's? I think it is. Some, sadly, refuse to see the truth though it stares them right in the eye. People can attempt to justify it by citing "denominational loyalty" or some other weak excuse, but may I remind you that our loyalty is to the Lord and to Him alone?

The hundreds of years that have elapsed since Elijah faced the Baal prophets on Carmel, many things have changed. Culture is vastly different now than it was then, religious practice has changed, the world itself is nothing like it was back then. However, one thing remains the same, God! If a man is going to be right with God, then he must take his stand apart from

the world. No one can have both. It is either God or it is the world. There can be no compromise (James 4:4).

Folks, it takes faith to be an Elijah! This man had honed his faith on the grindstone of affliction. He had already seen God do the miraculous, no rain-1 Kings 17:1; food supplied by ravens-1 Kings 17:2-7; an endless supply of meal and oil-1 Kings 17:8-16; and the resurrection of the widow's son-1 Kings 17:17-24. This man knew that this little thing was nothing for the Lord. He was willing to put his life on the line because he believed that he served a God who moves in response to His people's prayers.

We need that same faith today if we are to take our stand with the Lord and do what He leads us to do. We need to exercise faith in the Lord God of Heaven! Some might say, "Well preacher, if I had seen God do all those things, I might be able to have that kind of faith also." **What, do you need a miracle to spur you to faith in God? Then, I got one for you! How about the day Jesus Christ responded to your cry of faith and saved you soul? That is about the greatest miracle that I know anything about and if He can do that, then helping you and me to stand for Him in truth and righteousness is mere child's play.)**

The last sound the Baal prophets and priests heard as they were being led away to their deaths (v.40), was the sound of the people of God shouting praises to their Lord. What a sight and sound that must have been!

Nothing in this world is quite so liberating as finding yourself focused on God and on Him alone! When He has your attention, your affection and your allegiance, He will be satisfied and so will you! Nothing liberates the saint more than knowing you are in a place in your walk with the Lord that pleases Him. That there is nothing between you and God. That all sin, all worldliness and all sinful associations have been put away. When you get there, God can and will bless you with gladness of heart and joy of soul. And that, my friends, is worth any price that must be paid! Remember, Jesus came to set us free - John 8:36. As far as I know, everything I have said today has been the truth and the truth is what will make us free (John 8:32.)

Are there areas of your life you would have to say were worldly and abhorrent to God? Are you able to see to apostasy that abounds all around us? If so, maybe you would start to pray for churches, and pray for this church that we will ever be quick to recognize apostasy and that we will take our stand for Jesus. Maybe you have never been saved and you would like to meet this all-powerful, all-loving God. If you will come to Him, He will receive you and He will save your soul if you will ask Him to. Whatever the need of your heart and life today, please bring it to the Lord. Will you do that right now?