

Sermon Reading—1 Kings 18:16-45

Sermon Theme: The Lord is God. Follow Him.

It had been over 3 years since it last rained. People were getting desperate. Famine was severe. Food was scarce. Then the guy who had promised no rain or dew except at his word shows up again. The nerve of some people. Obviously King Ahab is ready to blame Elijah. He was the guy who made the promise! He was the troubler of the nation. He was the reason life was so hard. What had he, the king, done wrong? He was just doing what his family had done before him. Could you blame him for following in dad's steps and how he lived? He was just trying to make sure his wife was happy. Baal was the god from her home country. He didn't want the fighting at home. He wants to make sure she is comfortable. He was just doing what he thought was best for himself, for his family, even for the nation. How could you blame him? Like us, Ahab was just trying to find his way through life.

So should we be that surprised when the people of Israel followed suit? The neighboring countries said the way was to worship this god called Baal. There were 450 prophets who were backing this up! There were another 400 prophets of Asherah—another god—reaffirming this idea that there's more than one way. Then you see royal house who had made it quite clear which religion they supported. The prophets of Asherah were regulars at the queens table where she made sure they were taken care of. The royalty also had systematically killed and persecuted the prophets of the Lord so that Elijah even makes the claim he is the last of the prophets of the Lord. So you had society and the government all saying it. Then there was the fact that following other gods wasn't anything new. This had been going on for quite some time. There was a little bit of mixing going on too. A little worship of Baal here, a little time with the Lord over there. Bring a few elements together and you can convince yourself you are doing it the right way. You are just covering all the bases making sure everyone was happy. Mom and dad had done it. Society, their government, the practice around them said: following Baal is the way to a fulfilled life. This is the way to the best life you can live. Like us who are looking for direction in life, the Israelites wanted to find the right way.

You probably aren't going to hear someone say you need to follow Baal or Asherah. But, we do hear a world pointing to all sorts of different ways to have a fulfilled satisfying life. You will hear you need to follow your feelings and do what you think is best. Don't let anyone tell you what you can and cannot do. It's the false god of self. You hear from the world that the way is by helping others and fighting for this or that cause. It sounds noble but it's the false god of good works. You hear it's about the family; family is most important. And you feel the pressure from family too. But even family becomes a false god when we look to it to fill our voids and draw us away from

God's will. Quite simply, an idol or false god is anything that we love too much. So even good things, blessings that God gives to us can become false gods when we give them more respect and honor than our time and attention to God. They become false gods when we look to them give us peace and security. They become false gods when we put them first. So what do those look like in your life? Is it reputation? Is it your life plans and goals? Is it a sin that you keep going back to? Is it your stuff, money? What are you looking to in order to have a fulfilled satisfied life? Whether it's the world, family, or ourselves, we hear all sorts of different ways.

Elijah shows up to show *this* is the way. With the king, the prophets of Baal and Asherah, and all the people around him Elijah asks, "How long will you waver between two opinions? How long are you going to try and ride the fence? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." This isn't going to be a question of thoughts or feelings. What are the facts? Who is God?

God's messenger addresses you, "How long will you waver between two opinions?" Which do you follow? We want to believe we can have it both ways—follow after the false gods while being able to jump and follow the Lord when it's convenient for you. But that's not how this works. When chasing after something, you leave something behind. Either you follow God and his will, or you are chasing after something else.

How long will you waver between two opinions? The people didn't have a response. So once the awkward silence wears on long enough Elijah proposes a plan. It's going to be the Lord vs. Baal. Elijah versus the 450 prophets of Baal. Two bulls; one for each group with the Baal prophets having first choice. They will call upon the name of their god, and Elijah will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God. The people agree.

The prophets of Baal go first. You have to give it them; they are very devoted to their belief. Maybe some of that was stubbornness and not wanting to be seen as frauds. But I think even more they honestly believed Baal would answer. They jump around going wild calling on their god. Nothing happens. Elijah taunts them. "He's a god, isn't he? Maybe he's deep in thought, preoccupied with something else, maybe he's traveling or too busy. Maybe he's taking a nap and needs to be awakened? Shout louder!" So they did. And then when that wasn't working they are cutting and slashing themselves with swords and spears till their blood flowed. This went on from morning until early evening! But there was no response. No spark. No answer. No one paid attention.

That's what happens when you chase after false gods and expect them to answer you. When we listen to and chase after the idols and lies of this world, for while it may seem we are getting somewhere. They fill the void we feel. It goes along with what others are saying. It brings relief, some peace, even success. But then when life gets real, when

you need it the most, it falls flat. The person you rely on isn't there. The money doesn't quite cover. The reputation and success only gets you so far. The cause you were fighting for, the sin you keep going back to doesn't bring the satisfaction you crave. You feel lost. You are left feeling empty wondering what to do next because the truth you were following was a lie. You realize it's all just meaningless; chasing after the wind.

Maybe you don't realize it, but while we are seeking the right way in this life, there's a longing for something more, for eternity in each of us. We know there is something more after our time on this earth. But if we are not on the right path for that, then we will not be on the right path right now in this life. What we are really looking for is being on the right path to a relationship with God the Father. But there's only one way. No matter who says it, what the popular opinion of the day, what makes most sense at this time in history, it will not change the truth that there is only one way to the Father. It's a stumbling block. It's the most offensive thing to our human nature because it's completely independent of us. Scream, shout, do all sorts of impressive and commendable things. Those will not get you any closer to being on the way.

The prophets of Baal had their chance but now it's Elijah's turn. Curious minds wonder what he is doing when he rebuilds an old altar that had been torn down once upon a time. They continue to wonder as he digs a deep trench around the altar. No one can really figure out why he would think it's a good idea to douse the bull, wood, altar with water three separate times so that the trench is filled up with water. He doesn't shout, prance around, or do anything of the sort. He simply prays: **“Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”**

And the Lord does. Fire from heaven falls burning up the sacrifice, wood, stones, soil, and dries up all the water in the trench. There's no question where this fire came from. The people's hearts are turned to the Lord, they fall down and cry out: “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”

Through God's messenger, the people are shown the true way. And God continues to work this way today. God reveals himself not in fire falling from heaven, but in His Son who takes up his dwelling among us. He comes not to burn up all of mankind in righteous anger, but to take God's righteous anger on himself. He burns under God's wrath as the sacrifice for our sins. For all those idols we have bowed down to. For all those false gods that we turn back to. For all those good things and blessings we love too much and more than the Lord, Jesus suffers and dies. But with his perfect life and innocent death Jesus clears the path to the Father and bridges that gap that sin creates. And then he works to lead you to the way which is only through him. He sends the Holy

Spirit to make his sacrifice your own. By the power of his Word spoken into your ears and onto your heart he turns your dead heart of sin back to the Lord. He showers you with his forgiveness so that God's wrath will not fall on you. Instead, you have his love.

Oh, it's utter foolishness. It's crazy. It doesn't make sense. It sounds like a cop-out. But this is the way. The God of glory comes to you in the flesh and blood to suffer and die so that you might have peace with God. He doesn't wait for you to do something for him; Jesus comes to you. He doesn't expect for you to make the change, he works the change within you. He doesn't wait for you to make a decision or a feeling; Jesus declares you not guilty of sin and makes it yours. Jesus uses such simple means. Powerful. But simple. In the water and Word of baptism he makes you a new creation and shows the way to the Father is through him. Through his Word he shows you the tomb is empty so we have facts, not feelings, that this forgiveness, this new life, it's ours—a gift from God! With the Word and the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, he strengthens that new life within you with his body and blood forgiving you again and again.

And Jesus continues to work through the Word and Sacrament to turn our hearts back to the Lord. When we stumble along the way, he uses them to get us back on track. When we are easily distracted, he refocuses our thoughts to set our priorities straight. When we feel the pressures of the world around us, he comes assuring you again, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Follow the Lord. Working through the Word he guides you and the decisions you make in your life. He sets you on the right path assuring you that everything you do as God's child in Jesus' name is pleasing to him. He encourages you along the way of life when we feel less than satisfied and a little lost, "My grace is sufficient for you." Follow the Lord who saved you from sin and death. Follow the Lord who gives you life. Follow the Lord. He is God. Amen.