

FENCE RIDERS
1 Kings 18
see H. Stephen Shoemaker, “Elijah the Prophet,” *GodStories*
see Gene Getz, *Elijah*

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If Moses is the number one Jewish hero, then Elijah is definitely a very close number two. Even today, in the Jewish Passover meal a glass of wine is set in honor of Elijah and the expectation of his return to prepare the way for the Messiah. When a stranger in the Jewish world appears with greatness, people ask, “Is this Elijah?” When Jesus walked on earth, the people asked about Him, “Is He Elijah?” In the Gospels, when God picked two to bring along to talk with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, it was Moses and Elijah.

Who is Elijah, this individual which captivates eight chapters of 1 and 2 Kings? For the next three weeks we will be looking at the prophet Elijah, who he was, and what that means for us today.

Talk about unexpected company. Elijah drops into the story of 1 Kings in chapter 17 without any forewarning. He comes from thin air, and at the end of his life he vanishes into thin air. We catch Elijah in midcareer – no background information. That’s no surprise. **As Stephen Shoemaker has said, “Backgrounds do not make prophets, neither do parents nor Ph.D.s. Prophets are men and women seized by the living word of God, its truth burning in their bones. They are those who see through appearances and see the world as it really is. (H. Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, p. 89)**

Elie Wiesel says about the prophet:

Who is a prophet?... Someone who sees people as they are, and as they ought to be. Someone who reflects his time, yet lives outside time.... A prophet is forever awake, forever alert; he is never indifferent, least of all to injustice.... Restless, disquieting, he is forever waiting for a signal, a summons. Asleep he hears voices and follows visions; his dreams do not belong to him.... Often persecuted, always in anguish, he is alone – even when addressing crowds, when conversing with God or himself.... There is sometimes a theatrical aspect to him; he seems to recite lines written by someone else. And yet, in order for him to be a prophet, they must descend into the very depths of his being. In order for him to be inhabited or penetrated – or invaded – by God, he must be truly, authentically himself.... He is God’s sounding board. (Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits*, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, pp. 38-39)

Elijah makes a sudden appearance on the stage of the text to reprimand Ahab, king of Israel – a very, very wicked man. Buechner has said, “a prophet to a king was like ants to a picnic.” Elijah was more like a swarm of bees.

It was his wife Jezebel who was problem number two. He'd married her simply for the formation of a political alliance with Phoenicia. But, like most women – I mean, like a few women – she moved in and she took over, took over all of Ahab's life. Like a newlywed bride rearranging her husband's bachelor pad, Jezebel rearranged worship in ancient Israel. She wanted everybody to worship Baal, the fertility god. She set up idols and temples to Baal here and there, here and there. There were a legion of priests to Baal. And worst of all, she began the systematic execution of all of God's prophets.

Baal was the god of success and the god of the rhythms of rain and sun and seasons. It was a religion of the full harvest, of the house full of kids. It was the god of a life full of security and pleasure and plenty. It was the religion of success – if it works, do it; of self – if it serves me or meets my need, do it; and sensuality – if it feels good, do it. We are still tempted to worship Baal. Just the names have changed. Instead of the weather, we worship Wall Street. We fall down before idols of beauty and sensuality. And our self-centeredness stinks all the way to heaven.

It's so easy to forget what God has done for us. We're the generation without a history. We have no sense of history about who we are, who God is in our lives – individually and collectively – or in the life of our family. So, it seems, were the people of ancient Israel. Have they forgotten the God who had brought them out from their slavery in Egypt? Have they forgotten the God who provided for them as they meandered through the wilderness? Have they forgotten the wondrous acts of Yahweh?

Elijah might be accused of a lot of things, but he'll never be accused of verbosity. His message is a short one-liner. "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (17:1).

Why a drought? A drought because Baal was the god of fertility, the god of the storm, present in both the dew and the rain. By declaring a drought, Elijah was throwing down the gauntlet – I'll stop your Baal dead in his tracks.

Elijah had to hide. Can you imagine staying around if you had the power to cause it to rain, the power to end the drought? How many times – how many times would Ahab have sought to cajole Elijah into pronouncing rain?

So God sent him to the brook Kerith, east of the Jordan River. The dirty birds – ravens are unclean animals – came twice a day, bringing him bread and meat in the morning and the same menu in the evening. But eventually, even the brook Kerith dried up, and Elijah had no drink. God led him 100 miles north, to the home of a widow in the coastal city of Zarephath. He was there sustained by a poor widow who shared her meager rations with him. Miraculously, her jars of flour and oil never ran empty, because she had been a lady of faith with what little she had.

Some days later, the son of the widow became sick and died. She wished she had never seen Elijah. The oil and flour supplies were fine in themselves, but if that meant God would kill her son, she wanted out of the deal. "You made God think about me. If you had not been here, He would have continued to overlook my sin." She believed that Elijah's saintly presence in her home

had somehow drawn God's attention to her waywardness. She had distorted views about sin and suffering.

Elijah took her son from her embrace and carried him to the upper room. "Lord, are you going to bring calamity upon this widow with whom I am staying by causing her son to die?" Three times he prayed, "Lord, let life return. Lord, let life return. Lord, let life return" as he stretched himself out over the child.

God heard Elijah's prayers, and the son arose. He brought the son down to his mother. The woman was overjoyed. "Now I know that indeed you are a man of God."

But despite the severity of the drought in Samaria, Ahab did not budge. He still blamed the drought on Elijah rather than his own disobedience, his own worship of Baal. There was only one thing left to do. Elijah must lay before the people continued proof that Yahwah was the true God.

"Go to Ahab," God commands, "and I will bring rain."

Back in Samaria, Jezebel – Ahab's wife – is killing the prophets of God. And Obadiah, the second in the land, is hiding from his king's wife 100 prophets in a cave.

It is time for a showdown. When Elijah showed up – look at chapter 18, verse 17 – Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?"

"I'm not the trouble," Elijah protested, "but you and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandment of the Lord, and you have followed the Baals."

It's time for the showdown. Elijah issued the challenge to the prophets of Baal – 450 of them – to meet him on Mount Carmel. Two altars are erected on the mountain, one to Baal and the other to God, to Yahweh. A choice must be made. The people had to decide.

Look at verse 21

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

It's either/or, not both/and the prophet is saying to them. The prophet is saying to you. You cannot worship both God and Baal. You must choose. If God is God, follow Him. If Baal, follow him.

You must choose, says the prophet. If God is God, follow Him. If sensuality is God, follow sensuality.

You have to choose, says Elijah. If materialism is God, make all the money you can. But if God is God, worship Him.

You have to choose, says the prophet Elijah. If success is God, climb the ladder. If not, submit yourself in humility before Yahweh.

If your self-seeking desires are God, then follow them to your heart's content. But if God is God, walk His sacrificial path.

It's a challenge to avoid duplicity. There is a temptation always present within us. We want it both ways. We want God and we want Baal. We want human desires and God's desires. Notice Jesus has said no one can serve two masters. Elijah gave the challenge – no more duplicity, you have to make a choice. The crowd grew silent. Elijah had held up a mirror, and they saw who they were – an equivocating people.

They were, like we are, comparable to Dr. Seuss's Zoad.

**Did I ever tell you about the young Zoad,
Who came to two signs at a fork in the road?
One said, "To Place One," and the other, "To Place Two."
So the Zoad had to make up his mind what to do.
Well, the Zoad scratched his head
and his chin and his pants,
And he said to himself, "Now, I'll be taking chance.
If I go to Place One, that place may be hot.
So how do I know if I like it or not?
On the other hand, though, I'll feel such a fool
If I go to Place Two and I find it's too cool.
In that case, I may catch a chill and turn blue.
So, Place One may be best – not Place Two.
On the other hand, though, if Place One is too high,
I might get a terrible earache and die.
On the other hand, though,
what might happen to me
if I go to Place Two and find it's too low.
I could get some terrible strange pain in my toe.
So Place One may be best."**

**So he started to go, and he stopped and he said,
"On the other hand – on the other hand, other hand, other hand...."
And for thirty-six hours and one-half, that Zoad
made starts and made stops at that fork in the road,
saying, "No, don't take a chance. You may not be right."
Then he got an idea which was wonderfully bright.
"Play safe," cried the Zoad. "I'll play safe. I'm no dunce.
I'll simply start off to both places at once."**

**And that's how the Zoad, who would not take a chance,
Got to no place at all with a split in his pants.**

The RSV translates verse 21 this way:
How long will you go limping with two different opinions?

The Jerusalem Bible version says:
How long do you mean to hobble first on one leg then on the other?

The New English Bible says:
How long will you sit on the fence?

That's the question today that looms large over the text. How long can you sit on the fence? The crowd is following Baal. The crowd is following sex, success, and self. How long can you sit on the fence? How long can you live divided, wrestling inside? How long can we stand in double-mindedness? Trying to live both ways will wear us out and wear us down. It destroys us. "Blessed are the pure in heart," Jesus said, which means blessed are those who are willing one thing – the end of duplicity, choosing who we will be.

If God is God, go after him. But if Baal is God, follow him.

There are some of you here this morning, there are some of you watching by way of television, and you are fence riders. You are sitting on the fence. You want to worship God. You want all the benefits of being among the community of God. And yet, you want to worship that other Baal in your life, that other master. You cannot serve two masters.

You want to follow God, but you lack the courage to stand up and go against the crowd, like those ancient Israelites lacked the courage to stand for Yahweh and against Jezebel and her Baal.

It's time for the contest. You just gather your 450 prophets together. I'll be there. We'll set up a couple of altars, bring some wood – everything that is needed. Then a bull for each of us. But we won't light the fire. We'll let God light the fire.

That seemed fair enough. So they gathered early in the morning, and Elijah said, "You go first."

So they danced and they pranced and they cut themselves as liturgical practice would have it. They did everything that was necessary to call down Baal to ignite this sacrificial altar wood. But nothing happened. Nine o'clock came, and ten o'clock came, and they were getting bloody by this time. And eleven o'clock and twelve o'clock came.

By this time Elijah, who is leaning on something off to the side, decides to mock them. He says, "I think your god is out to lunch. It's not working, is it? Maybe he has gone to the men's room (that's really what he says in the Hebrew text of 18:27). Well, I'll give you a little more time." He begins to boast like an obnoxious football fan whose team is ahead by 41 points at half time.

So they take a little more time. They get the frenzy going, everything is in motion except the fire. There is no fire. By three o'clock Elijah says, "I think you've had all the time you need. It's my turn."

So he puts his bull on the right place. He not only has the wood there, he also the trench around it and covers everything with water – just to make sure they get the point when it happens. And it happens. I mean, God did the trick. (Eugene Lowry, "Listening to the Dark," *Preaching Today*)

Elijah prays. Look at verse 36

O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that Thou, O Lord, art God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again.

Fire came down from heaven. It consumed the bull. It consumed the wood. It was even so hot that it torched the stones and licked up the water that was in the trench.

No more fence sitting in Israel. The people shout – look at verse 39 – "The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God." That's really Elijah's name. It means "Yahweh, the Lord is God."

There is the pumping of victorious blood running through his veins. And there is the Law of Moses that says that false prophets are to be put to death. So Elijah said, "Seize the prophets; do not let one of them escape." He seized them and killed them, the prophets of Baal.

Look at chapter 18, verse 21 again.

How long will you hesitate between two opinions?

How long will you sit on the fence?

What is it in your life that makes you a fence sitter? Is there a relationship in your life – one that is not healthy, one that is not good? But, in your own selfishness and your own sensuality, in your own striving for success you just can't give it up. Your relationship with God demands that you give up any relationship that threatens your relationship with Him.

How long will you sit on the fence?

Is it a materialistic selfishness that causes you to want more and more things, bigger and better toys? A credit craze that makes you have monthly payments – so much so that you can't tithe your income to the church.

How long will you sit on the fence?

Is it the desire to be popular – so much so, that if the crowd goes this way you wouldn't dare go the other way? When the Jezebels of this world call you to come and follow them and their gods, you do so because you're bowing down to popularity or acceptance.

How long will you sit on the fence?

Is it an addiction in your life?

How long will you sit on the fence?

You can't follow God half way. It's all the way, or no way.

How long will you sit on the fence.

There are some of you here today who need to follow God for the first time. Some of you watching by way of television need to follow God for the first time. Some of you, like the people of ancient Israel, need to recommit yourself to the God of your history, the God of your family, the God of your faith. You need to stand out from the crowd and say, "It is the Lord. He is God. And I will follow and serve Him."

How long will you sit on the fence?