

The Story – Elijah

Last Sunday we talked about David. This morning we fast forward about one hundred years from 970 BC to around 870 BC. A lot happened in those 100 years. David anointed Solomon as his successor as king. Solomon, referred to as the wisest man on earth at that time made the mistake of disobeying the Lord. He married all these foreign women (hundreds of women) and the bible says **“His wives turned his heart after other gods...so Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely as David his father had done.”** Because of his sin the Lord said he would tear the kingdom away from Solomon and give it to one of his subordinates. **“Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.”** 1 Kings 11:12-13

Solomon’s son, Rehoboam becomes king and he is foolish, proud, cruel and just as God said, the kingdom is torn from him. One of Solomon’s officials, a man named Jeroboam leads a rebellion and becomes king over the ten northern tribes which is then known as Israel and Rehoboam continues to rule over the southern tribes known as Judah with the capital remaining in Jerusalem. Jeroboam makes Samaria the capital of Israel and fearing the people will change their loyalty if they keep going back to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, Jeroboam builds two places of worship in Israel, one in the north at Dan and one in the southern part of Israel at Bethel. He builds golden calves to worship and leads Israel further into idolatry.

The once united monarchy is gone. The glory days under David and Solomon will not return. With the Hebrew people now split into two nations, Israel and Judah, 1 and 2 Kings basically tells the story back and forth of one bad king after another in the two nations. Approximately 20 kings in the north and 20 in the south. We read over and over, “and ____ did evil in the eyes of the Lord and sinned more than all those before him.” The point of the books of kings is not just to tell the story, but to show us the downward spiral. Eventually, because of their continued sin God judged the people. Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and carried off into exile, essentially never to be heard from again. Judah would later be conquered by the Babylonians and the city of Jerusalem destroyed, along with the temple.

Probably in exile the people asked, “Why did this happen? How could God let this happen?” and the answer came in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. It showed the down fall of God’s people due to their disobedience, their idolatry and sin.

It is during this time God sent prophets to warn the people of the coming judgment and exile. God wanted to turn the hearts of his people away from idols and back to himself. Elijah, the man we are talking about today, is one of those prophets. He is sent to the northern kingdom of Israel when Ahab was the king of Israel. When you think it can’t get any worse, the bible says of King Ahab, “He did more to provoke the Lord God than all the kings of Israel before him.” (So he’s got that going for him!) It was worse than it had ever been!

Ahab was married to a wicked women named Jezebel. She was not Jewish. She was a worshiper and follower of the idol baal and Jezebel influenced Ahab to introduce baal worship in Israel. Together they had the prophets of God murdered and had replaced them with 450 prophets of baal and 400 prophets of the female goddess, Asherah.

It’s in this setting God sends Elijah to remind the people of Israel that the true God is not dead nor silent nor is his power diminished in any way. Baal was considered to be the weather god, the god of the rain and lightning so God sends Elijah to tell king Ahab that there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at the Lord God’s command! Let’s see who really controls the weather! Sure enough, there is no rain, the crops fail and famine results from the drought. Baal appears impotent, but that only infuriates Ahab and Jezebel and they attempt to have Elijah killed. Turn to 1 Kings 17 and let’s look at Elijah’s story.

After Elijah tells Ahab it isn’t going to rain, the Lord tells Elijah to hide because Ahab and Jezebel aren’t very happy. God tells Elijah to hide near a little brook and he would take care of him. Miraculously, strangely, ravens brought Elijah bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening and he drank from the brook. Eventually however, since there was no rain falling, the brook dried up and God told Elijah to go to Zarephath, a city about 100 miles away in what would now be modern day Lebanon. It was the area where Jezebel came from! It must have seemed to Elijah that God was sending him into enemy territory. Nevertheless, Elijah obeyed and found a widow woman there with a young son. He asked her for a drink of water and a piece of bread. Remember there was a drought and as a result there was a famine. No grain for flour. She explained that all she had was a little bit of flour and a jar with a little oil in it. She told Elijah she was gathering sticks to build a fire to make some bread for her and her son

and that would be their last meal. Elijah told her to first fix him a cake of bread, then fix something for herself and her son. If she would do that, in faith taking care of God's servant, God would provide for her until the rain came again.

Remember this woman was herself most likely a baal worshiper. She wasn't Jewish. She had no reason to trust Elijah. Perhaps out of kindness or desperation, ("what difference would it make, we're going to starve anyway") she did as Elijah asked and as a result there was flour and oil in the jar everyday. The supply never ran out. God miraculously supplied.

Verse 17 tells us that sometime later, as this widow lady is caring for Elijah, her son becomes ill and dies. Elijah took the boy upstairs to his room and cried out to God and the Lord heard him and raised the boy from the dead. The woman said, **"Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth." 1 Kings 17:24**

During this time while Elijah is hiding in plain sight in Zarephath, 1 Kings 18:10 tells us Ahab and Jezebel searched for Elijah in every nation and kingdom but had been unable to locate him. Now, after 3½ years without rain, God tells Elijah to return to Samaria and tell Ahab he is going to send rain on the land but first, there is going to be a showdown. We need to get a few things straight.

Elijah tells Ahab to summon the people of Israel to Mount Carmel, and bring the 450 prophets of baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah as well. When the people arrive, Elijah says, **"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. But the people said nothing." 1 Kings 18:21**

Elijah then issues a challenge. Get two bulls and give one to the prophets of baal and one to me. Prepare the bull for a sacrifice, place him on the wood but don't set fire to the wood. To the prophets of baal, Elijah said, **"Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire – he is God." Then all the people said, 'What you say is good.'" 1 Kings 18:24**

The prophets of baal prepare the bull on the sacrifice and then they begin to pray and cry out to their god. From morning till noon they cried and shouted and danced around the altar they had made. The bible says there was no response and no one answered. No wonder. Baal is only a piece of stone or metal they carved themselves.

Elijah taunted them, suggesting perhaps baal was busy, or deep in thought, or had gone on a journey. Maybe your god is asleep! In desperation the prophets cut themselves and did

everything they knew to get their god to respond. They exercised all the faith they knew how to exercise until late afternoon. I love this verse: **“But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.”**

Elijah then dug a trench around his altar and had them fill the trench with water and to pour water on top of the sacrifice and the wood. He soaked everything in water and then prayed this prayer. **“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that You, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.’ Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, ‘The Lord – he is God. The Lord – he is God.’” 1 Kings 18:36-39**

Remember that baal was the weather god, controlling the rain and the lightning. When the people saw fire fall from heaven and consume the sacrifice, it must have looked like lightning struck the altar. No wonder they fell on their face and cried, “The Lord, he is God!” Elijah then told the people to seize the prophets of baal. They led them down into the valley below Mt. Carmel and Elijah had them put to death. Elijah then sent Ahab on his way, went to the top of Carmel and prayed for the Lord to send rain. The God who answers by fire is also the God who is able to answer with rain and the bible says a heavy rain came as Ahab rode off to Jezreel. One other strange note, the bible says the power of God came upon Elijah and he tucked his cloak into his belt and outran Ahab in his chariot all the way to Jezreel.

When Ahab got home he told Jezebel what had happened and Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, essentially, “I’m going to see that you are dead by this time tomorrow, so help me baal.” Elijah in fear headed south away from Israel. The bible says he ran for his life. He ran as far as Beersheba, and then ran on another day’s journey into the Negev, the desert. If Ahab and Jezebel couldn’t find him before, they sure couldn’t find him now, not in this wilderness. Elijah told God he wanted to die, but God had other plans for Elijah. The Lord provided food and drink for Elijah, gave him rest, and then brought him to a place where Elijah could once again hear the voice of the Lord. This time God spoke to Elijah, not in wind or an earthquake, not in a fire or through some big demonstration, but the bible says God spoke through a gentle whisper. **“What are you doing here, Elijah?” “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The**

Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left and now they are trying to kill me too.” 1 Kings 19:13-14

The Lord told Elijah he still had work for him to do. God told him to return because there are future kings to anoint, a successor to choose and train. God let him know he wasn't alone. There were 7,000 Israelites who had never bowed their knee to baal and had remained true to the Lord. God would take care of Ahab and Jezebel. Trust and God would provide. There were more adventures ahead for Elijah including a trip to heaven in a fiery chariot.

That's the story. Let me just point out a couple of things we need to notice. In Elijah's prayer on Mt. Carmel he said, **“Let it be known that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant.”** That may be the key to this whole story and the key to what we need to remember. Regardless of the circumstances in Israel, God was still God. Regardless of how wicked the people or the rulers, God was still God. His people were in the minority, but there were still 7,000 Israelites that believed and understood **God was still God, regardless.**

God was God in Israel when the ravens showed up and the water was flowing in the brook Cherith and he was still God when the brook dried up and the ravens stopped delivering breakfast and supper. God was God as he provided unfailing flour and oil for the widow and the prophet. He was still God when the widow's son died and he was God when Elijah prayed and God brought the boy back to life.

He was God when fire fell on Mt. Carmel and when the rain fell in the Jezreel valley. He was God when Elijah ran ahead of Ahab's chariot and he was still God when Elijah ran for his life from Ahab and Jezebel. God wants us to hear it and know it this morning. God is still God, in the good times and in the bad. He is God in our victories and he is still God when we experience defeat. He is still God, no matter the economy, no matter who the president is or will be! No matter how dark the day or the night, God is still God. We can say like Elijah on Mt. Carmel, **“Let it be known that you are God in Oklahoma, and in America even if we are as wicked and idolatrous as Israel was. Let it be known that you are God in Syria and North Korea and China and Afghanistan. Let it be known that you are God! And that's not all. Let it be known that we are your servants.**

That's the second thing we mustn't miss. **Elijah was God's servant, regardless.** Regardless of whether the brook dried up or not. Whether the ravens came with food or not.

Whether the widow's son lived or died, whether fire fell or the rain came or not, Elijah was determined to serve the Lord. Circumstances don't determine commitment. Popularity polls, opinion polls, economic forecasts don't determine commitment. Whether the people were on Elijah's side on Mt. Carmel or on Ahab's side blaming Elijah for the drought, Elijah would still serve the Lord. Elijah thought he was the only one left on God's side but he was still going to serve the Lord! He asked God to just take his life and let him go home because he was tired of running, tired of the battle, but Elijah wasn't giving up on God. He was still a servant of the Lord. That hadn't changed. That would not change.

Exhausted. Burned out, but Elijah didn't give up. God had more for him. Not just in anointing future kings or choosing another prophet. God had more for him because Elijah knew how to stand up to pressure. Elijah knew how to stand alone with God when everyone was against him. Elijah knew how to keep going, serving the Lord, regardless. Why is that important? In Mark 9 Jesus is facing his final trip to Jerusalem and ultimately to the cross. He knew everyone would desert him and he would have to stand alone. Thinking about this Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up on a high mountain to pray and suddenly Jesus was transfigured before them and guess who showed up to talk with Jesus and encourage him? Elijah and Moses. Don't you imagine Elijah was thankful he hadn't given up? He remained faithful. Elijah couldn't have imagined someday God would use his experience to encourage Jesus! Elijah knew something about being outnumbered and alone and yet still trusting God.

God is still God, regardless of the circumstances, regardless of what is going on in your life and God is looking for Elijahs! He is looking for someone who will serve him when the brook is flowing and when it is all dried up. He is looking for someone who will serve him when he answers by fire and everything is going well and who will still serve him when the enemy is pursuing and has you on the run. God is looking for servants who won't quit and won't give up.

Are you willing to be like Elijah? Trusting, serving God regardless of the circumstances or the outcome? Are you willing to trust God like Elijah? Who knows, like Elijah encouraging Jesus, there may be someone in your future that your story will encourage. Don't quit! Keep on trusting and let it be known that God is still God and you are his servant!