

***Either/Or in a Both/And Culture***

1 Kings 18:20-39

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A song by the Lovin' Spoonful that was popular when I was in high school asked a question:

Did you ever have to make up your mind?

Pick up on one and leave the other one behind

It's not often easy, and not often kind

Did you ever have to make up your mind?

Did you ever have to finally decide?

Say yes to one and let the other one ride

There's so many changes, and tears you must hide

Did you ever have to finally decide?

That is the issue this morning as we think about the story of Elijah at Mount Carmel. It is also the issue this morning as we come to this table: this bread and this cup are for disciples, for those who have made up their mind about following Jesus. Have we made up our minds?

In Elijah's time, the problem in Israel was not that the people of the northern kingdom had all converted to Baalism. The problem was that they were undecided. They were limping between two opinions—like a man who has one bad leg and can't quite walk upright, leaning first to the left and then to the right. Those of you over 50 will remember Chester on *Guns Smoke*, limping down the main street of Dodge City, shouting, "Marshall Dillon, Marshall Dillon!" The people of Israel would lean toward Baal, the main god of Phoenicia and the god of Queen Jezebel, then they would lean toward Yahweh, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The prophet Elijah comes into that situation, and his name—you have to wonder if it's like a stage name—is El-i-Yah, God is Yah, short for Yahweh. There was no question in his mind or soul as to who God is. The true God is the one who made a covenant with Abraham and brought the slaves out of Egypt and established a covenant with the whole nation.

Why were some Israelites going after Baal? Three reasons: the three great motivators—money, sex, and power. The Baal religion was a kind of prosperity gospel, promising good crops and riches if you did certain rituals to appeal to the fertility gods that controlled the natural world. And being a fertility cult, Baalism also involved sex. Some of the rituals involved sex acts and using "sacred" prostitutes; to many people in the ancient world, that felt like a powerful religious experience. Then there was the political side of Baalism. Ahab had married Jezebel to form an alliance with Phoenicia, between Israel and the Mediterranean; they were a rising power and a sea power. It's like people today who might learn Chinese and get into Tai Chi or Taoism because China is the next big thing.

Not many Israelites would have wanted to give up the God of their fathers and mothers. They just thought they could have it both ways. Why not stay Jewish but tack on another religion that is more focused on money, sex, and power? Elijah's answer to that question would have been that we are not talking about religion as a human cultural activity. We are talking about a relationship with an actual supernatural being. You are relating either to Yahweh or to Baal. If you know anything about Yahweh, you know he doesn't like people cheating on him with other gods. That is the first commandment: no other gods. I am not one god among many. I read this

week that the *only* sexual behavior that Americans still find absolutely wrong is cheating on your partner—by something like 88%. The two sins that the entire Old Testament is concerned about are (1) following other gods, and (2) oppressing the poor. “Love God and love your neighbor” is the antidote to the two great sins.

At this point Yahweh wants to ask Israel, in the words of the old Louis Jordan song, “Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Baby?” It’s time to make a choice.

In our culture we don’t like telling people they have to choose. When Aristotle began to write about logic, his starting point was the rule of non-contradiction. If A is true, then not-A cannot be true. From that you got the rule of the excluded middle: If either A or B is true, one of them has to be false and you cannot simply create a mediating solution that says that each is half-true. Or, as postmoderns would say these days, that both A and B are true even if they contradict each other.

You know that bumper sticker that says COEXIST, spelled out in the symbols of world religions? If that means that all religious people should be kind and tolerant toward each other, I’m all for it. But for some people it means that you can believe in all of those religions, that all paths go up the same mountain—and that’s simply a denial of reality. It’s not all that different than in Elijah’s day. If Baal is really God, then the world is based on cycles of nature and fertility which get pushed forward by sex. If Yahweh is really God, then the world is based on a creator God who is also the liberator of the oppressed, who lives in a covenant relationship that includes moral expectations. You can’t have it both ways. The basis of reality is different. The whole world view is different. And, of course, Elijah would add, there is the problem that Yahweh is real and historical while Baal is a nature myth who doesn’t exist.

So Elijah sets up a test to demonstrate which God is real. This takes a lot of faith or chutzpah. It was more or less understood that one way gods manifested themselves was in fire. So Elijah calls for the Yahweh challenge. On this side, Baal, Inc. with 450 government religionists. On this side, Yahweh, represented by one lone prophet. The challenge was simple: each side got a bull to sacrifice on a pile of wood. Ask your god to come down and accept the bull as a burnt offering by sending fire.

The Baal priests prayed for hours. If prayer alone has power, it should have worked. (A lot of people talk about the power of prayer. I don’t believe in the power of prayer; I believe in the power of God.) Elijah then started to make fun of them: What’s the problem, boys? Is your god gone on a trip? Maybe he had to go to the john. Maybe he’s asleep. To get Baal’s attention, the priests began to cut themselves, to attract his power by their own blood. But as the text says so powerfully: “there was no voice, no answer, and no response.”

Then it was Elijah’s turn. Lest anyone think he had some kind of trick, he ordered water poured on and around the wood—three times. He prayed a simple prayer: “Yahweh, let it be known that you are God, that I am your servant, and that you commanded me to do these things. Answer me, Yahweh, so that these people will know that you are God and their hearts will be turned back to you.” Right away fire fell on the spot, licking up the bull meat, the wood, the stones, and all the water. The people fell on their faces and said, “Yahweh is indeed God.”

There were not many times in Israel’s history—or in our own histories—that God proved himself on demand. Most of the time we are asked to choose God without the fire, on the basis of his word and his reality in the life of the people of God. But the question posed by the prophet still comes to us: How long will you limp between two opinions? If the God of Israel and Jesus is the real God, then follow him—live like he is real, do what he commanded. If Baal is the real God, then follow him. But don’t tell me that it’s both/and.

Of course you are not tempted to follow Baal, literally, although you may be tempted by money, sex, and power. There may be a few of you who would like to practice cafeteria religion, taking a little of this and a little of that according to your own tastes. You might want to be a little Christian, a little Hindu, a little Sufi, a little Native American; actually you could say that there is a community of people following that hybrid religion on Block Island. Intellectually, of course, that is nonsense—not that that matters anymore. But while the Hindu gods are fine with sharing the pantheon with thousands of others, the Christian God—who is, after all, the God of Israel—demands to be the only one. He is insistent that all the other gods are fakes. They have no power at all. The Elijah story tells us that we have to choose. God lays out an either/or. In Deuteronomy 30, he says “I have set before you blessing and curses, life and death. Therefore choose life.” Joshua says, “Choose this day whom you will serve, the gods of your ancestors or the gods of this culture, but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh.”

But my pastoral concern for you this morning is not that you are being tempted to mix Christianity with other religions. My concern is that there may be other gods who are pulling you away from the God of the Bible we know through Jesus. Jesus himself understood that the most powerful god in his own day was money. He said “No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and Money.” What is the dominant concern in your life? Is it God and what God wants? Or is it something else—family, financial security, “the Block Island lifestyle,” perhaps even alcohol or drugs? Whatever it is—even if it is something good—if it is anything other than God that you are treating as your ultimate value, you are limping between two opinions. You may say you are a Christian, but in fact you fall into the camp of the undecided.

In a sermon back in 1857, Charles Haddon Spurgeon asked his London congregation how long it would take for them to make up their mind:

Some of you have been halting until your hair has grown gray; the sixtieth year of some of you is drawing nigh. Is not sixty years long enough to make up your choice? *“How long halt ye?”* Perhaps one of you may have tottered into this place, leaning on his staff, and you have been undecided up till now. Your eightieth year has come; you have been a religious character outwardly, but a worldling truly; you are still up to this date halting, saying, “I know not on which side to be.” How long, sirs, in the name of reason, in the name of mortality, in the name of death, in the name of eternity, *“How long halt ye between two opinions?”* Ye middle-aged men, ye said when ye were youths, “When we are out of our apprenticeship we will become religious; let us sow our wild oats in our youth, and let us then begin to be diligent servants of the Lord.” Lo! ye have come to middle age, and are waiting till that quiet villa shall be built, and ye shall retire from business, and then ye think ye will serve God. Sirs, ye said that same when ye came of age, and when your business began to increase. I therefore solemnly demand of you, *“How long halt ye between two opinions?”* How much time do you want?

This is the same either/or that Jesus places before us. Over and over he made clear that you cannot be his disciple and live for yourself. Loyalty to Jesus has to be everything. The story we read from Luke of the three would-be disciples strikes us as harsh. The first one says “I will follow you wherever you go”—as some of us have said. And Jesus responds, “Do you realize I am homeless? Is that what you want?”—and the man apparently turns away.

The second one says “Let me go bury my father,”—that is, my father is old and I cannot follow you until after he is gone—and Jesus says, “Let the dead bury the dead, but your job is to proclaim the kingdom of God.”

The third one says, “Just let me say goodbye to the people back home,” but Jesus says no. “No one who puts his hand to the plow and then turns back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Maybe he just means that you have to focus on the one task at hand—you can’t plow straight if you are looking backwards. But I suspect that Jesus was alluding to the story of Elijah the prophet calling Elisha to be his disciple. He called Elisha when he was out plowing in the field, but Elisha asked to say goodbye to his family. Elijah had said yes—but Jesus is saying that his call is even more urgent than the call that Elijah issued. But do you know what Elisha did after saying goodbye to his family? He *burned* both his plow and his ox, so that he could never go back.

That is the either/or of the gospel. Jesus says, “Choose whom you will serve.” How long will you limp between two opinions; how long will you sit on the fence; how long will you try to be both a Jesus follower and a success in the world? If Money is your God, follow the money. If Jesus is God, then follow him.