

We're in the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of our 7-week sermon series entitled, *A Tale of Two Prophets*: featuring Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha (remember "j" comes before "s"). A quick recap of last week: The Israelites complained that they wanted an earthly king (1 Sam. 8:5). God granted their request and gave them an earthly king. They're now on their seventh king of Israel, Ahab, and he's the most evil of all the kings thus far. And to top it off, he is married to Jezebel, a princess from Sidon who worships Baal, the Canaanite storm god, along with Ahab and many others in Israel. This is where the prophet Elijah enters the scene. But before we go any further, we need to go back to Egypt. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and God through Moses led them to freedom through the Red Sea and into the wilderness for forty years until they reached the Promised Land. Along the way in the wilderness, there were lots of things that took place. One to highlight is the story of the golden calf. Moses was on top of Mt. Sinai for forty days/nights receiving the Ten Commandments while the Israelites became impatient and bored and asked Moses' brother, Aaron, to make them a golden calf to worship. What's the first commandment? "You shall have no other gods before me." The people weren't ready to obey the law and commandments the Lord had written. Moses came down the mountain, saw what was going on, broke the tablets and destroyed the golden calf. Moses then asked the Lord to forgive the Israelites, and the Lord told Moses to create some new stone tables. Now let's take even a bigger step back in Israel's history. Father Abraham had many sons and one of them was Issac. Isaac had twins Esau and Jacob. Jacob stole his brother's birthright and later ended up wrestling with an angel. With a hip socket

out, Jacob was given a new name: Israel (Gen. 35:10). Israel had twelve sons, one of whom was Joseph, the one with the coat of many colors. Joseph and his brothers were the twelve tribes of Israel. Fast forward some years back to the earthly kings. Though King David, the second king of Israel, united the twelve tribes into a kingdom- after they fought again- and received God's promise that his lineage would bring forth a messianic king, the rulers who followed him strayed far from the covenant. Gosh we humans just keep reinventing the wheel, don't we?! So after King Solomon, David's son, died, the tribes of Israel now are in two parts: the Northern kingdom, Israel, where ten of the tribes are located, and the Southern kingdom, Judah, where two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) are located. The unfaithfulness of both kingdoms plunged the nation into idolatry, injustice, and eventual ruin. And that's where we pick up in today's story. It's hard to believe it's been three years since the prophet Elijah barged into King Ahab's court and pronounced a drought/famine. As soon as the words left his mouth, God told Elijah to go and hide near the Jordan and that the ravens would feed him. Elijah did exactly as the Lord commanded him, and God kept his word. Elijah was fed. One day the water dried up, so God told Elijah to travel from Israel to Judah, specifically to Zarephath in Sidon and live there. God also told Elijah that a widow there who would feed him. Yes, a widow in a drought. God provided over and over again. In today's story, we find Elijah, who courageously has approached King Ahab again, who, along with his wife, Queen Jezebel, have been after Elijah's head for three years. Before we turn to God's word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

It's a showdown between the God of Israel and Baal. On Mount Carmel Elijah partners with God in challenging those who were on the fence about which God was the one true God. The "Will the Real God please stand up" contest takes place on Mount Carmel surrounded by hundreds of Baal's prophets. Elijah, though outnumbered, doesn't beat around the bush. He names the elephant on Mount Carmel with a pointed question: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" In other words, "Don't be fair weather believers. Followed up by this blunt statement: "If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." Baal is the Caananite god of weather and Asherah (v. 19b) is the goddess of fertility, yet Elijah knows that only the God of Israel can really make it rain. But Elijah leaves the choice of who they will follow up to those gathered. The choice is yours- I mean, theirs. The temptation lingers as they'd like to double dip- keeping their options open to receive blessings from both the God of Israel and Baal. Regardless, the claim of scripture is that there is only one God and one God alone. A decision must be made. With this question and statement from Elijah, silence overcame the crowd. No response. No Amen. Nothing. Perhaps they were stunned or convicted? Perhaps they don't know how to pick?!

Imagine this- channel surfing and stumbling upon a show featuring these religious fanatics. And pictured are different tribes and people and buildings from long ago. A narrator says, "They were crazy. Well, you would think they were crazy if you didn't understand their culture and their religion. That's just the thing...they were worshippers of idols. And they took things to extremes. They painted their bodies. They wore

these ridiculous costumes. They chanted. They danced. They made sacrifices to their idols. They had built these enormous temples in which to worship their idols. It seemed like their entire existence climaxed into this one scenario- this one, over-the-top act of worship. And then the narrator pauses and says, "You don't really relate, do you? Let's try it again." The video rewinds and then offers new, up-to-date images but with the same words. I'll leave the images to your imagination. And once again the narrator pauses and says, "Idol worship. It's not just about golden calves anymore" ([video](#)). End of scene. Mike drop.

History has proven that humans undoubtedly have an instinct for religion. If they don't have a god or are bored with God, they will make one. From the start, Elijah's audience is not the king or the Baal prophets- but the people. It was time for Israel to declare its allegiance, one way or the other; God would not take any second-place arrangement in anyone's heart. Look around you! We are surrounded by idol worship. Webster's dictionary defines an idol as "a representation or symbol of an object of worship; an object of extreme devotion." The fact that for over 22 years we've had a singing contest on TV entitled "American Idol" speaks to the importance in our culture of extreme devotion- even to the point of worship- of someone or something in addition to God. There can be a thin line between being fans and followers. The choice to follow only the real God is all that easy, and it's all that hard. Of course we want to follow only God, yet how do we distinguish between the things of Baal and the things of God? There are many competing voices for our allegiance- our time, money, and energy

today. Just like the Israelites, our idols separate and distract us from the real God. It happens before we really know it. We still have Jesus Christ of course. He is Lord, we say. But there are many other altars at which we can bow the knee besides that of Christ. It really boils down to what one writer, calls “**one of many or the one and only**” (Kyle Idelman, *Not A Fan*). We, too, must make a choice. All idols are not inherently evil. Herein lies the challenge of identifying our gods or idols. One scholar notes, “these things aren’t immoral but amoral; they are morally neutral until they are not. You could be serving something that is very commendable but as soon as it gets in the way of God or takes the place of God...it becomes an idol” (Idelman). Even our virtues can become vices- or idols- if they are not directed toward God (Slaughter, *Shiny Gods*, p. 116). The bottom line is “when things such as financial security, self-gratification, or even family take priority in our lives, over obedience and service to God, they indeed become idols, and we worship them” (FOW, Wilfong p. 79).

What or who are our idols? Addiction? Relationships? Possessions? Politics? Cars? Being Willing to Do Almost Anything to Be Cool? Sex? Sports? Musicians? Money? Extreme Exercise? Possessions? Power? The list goes on and on. What or who is keeping us from fully, truly worshiping God? What or who keeps us from turning to God first in our lives? Like the Israelites, it’s not that we’re **not** worshiping God; we waver and wander and aren’t worshiping God and God alone. We live in a society that doesn’t always value commitment. Somewhere in our hearts or minds, many of us don’t fully trust that God is God and that

God will sustain and provide for us. Our souls are hungry and yet, we devote elsewhere. “We make ourselves sick trying to appease powers that aren’t real. We look for love in places that can’t sustain unconditional love. We search for hope in things that cannot transform us” (FOW, Sharp, p. 76). We desperately create our own gods to meet our needs or worldview. Writer Anne Lamott says, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

The rules for this contest were laid out, and everyone agreed- whichever god brings fire first is the one true God. The prophets of Baal go first. From morning until noon they cry out to Baal, “Answer us! But there is no voice, no answer. Nothing. Desperate, they jump and dance around the altar they made. They limp around- unsteady on their feet- unsure of stable ground. It probably doesn’t help that Elijah begins to mock them after some time. Remember- Elijah is not perfect. He sarcastically suggests many excuses as to why Baal is unresponsive to their prayers. And then the prophets of Baal begin to do something very destructive- though according to scripture, a custom of theirs. They cut themselves until blood is drawn and still not one peep from Baal (v. 29). No matter how we clothe our idols, they cannot save us. Only God through Jesus Christ can save us! Elijah calls the people in closer and reassembles another altar. He takes twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and he builds an altar with a large trench surrounding it- all in God’s name. He sets up the sacrifice and instructs the people to grab four jars of water and to pour them out- not once but

three times- What's 4x3? 12! This is symbolic calling for the UNITY of the twelve tribes. Elijah also asks for what is most precious to them at the time- water in the midst of a drought. They douse it all, saturating everything on and around the altar. Then Elijah prays fervently to God- a two-sentence prayer. *O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back'* (vv. 36-37). Elijah's appeal to the "Lord, God of Abraham, Issac, and Israel," connects the need to choose the God who answered prayers and kept promises through previous generations. The God Elijah calls on is no stranger. Immediately the fire of the Lord falls and consumes everything on the altar, even the stones burned and the water was licked up in the trench (v. 38). This fire burns beyond the normal physics of fire. The arrival of fire signaled to Elijah that the rain was on the way. Covered in amazement and awe, the people who saw it, fell on their faces in worship and confession of the one, true, living God (v. 39)! We aren't told whether King Ahab made a confession of God. Did he choose a god? Which one? Many assume that he has turned back only to the God of Israel. Friends, "droughts of many kinds parch our cultural landscape" (FOW, Sharp, p. 78), and we forget that with God all things are possible. Help us to resist the temptation to place our trust and faith in anything/one other than you, O God! Direct our paths and may we choose to follow. Amen.