



# “What Do We Require?”

a sermon by

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As I mentioned last week, we have begun a new chapter in our Faith@Work series called Humanity in Discipleship. Over the next several weeks we will be looking at the humanity behind the Biblical witness of those who struggled to respond faithfully to the presence of God in their world. While we will be focusing on the lives of individuals primarily, looking at how individuals might voice or embody the questions, struggles, and celebrations of many, so often in the Bible the struggles of many are given a singular voice. So it is with our text today, I Kings 18:20-39, arguably one of the most dramatic narratives of a book filled with drama. To set the stage, King Ahab was ruler of Israel at this time. He was a competent leader with wide support but was condemned by the prophet Elijah for doing more to provoke the Lord to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. In an atmosphere of religious and cultural pluralism, Ahab accommodated his subjects by granting the Canaanite god Baal the same status as Yahweh, the God of Israel, though the Lord would call him time and again to draw Israel to worship the God of Jacob alone. In a political alliance Ahab also married Jezebel, a strong willed Phoenician who was killing all the prophets of the Lord. Elijah has summoned Ahab to gather all the people of Israel and all the prophets of Baal to the top of a mountain, for they had forsaken the Lord. Here we begin our reading. Hear the Word of God:

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you limp between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. Then Elijah said to them, I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let them choose for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. 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." Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" They shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon, Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" He said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it a third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: 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 indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.” Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God. Let us pray. Holy God as we gather together in your name so to do we ask for the certainty of your presence in our midst. Restore us in this hour in body and spirit, replenish our souls that our thirst for your Word might be quenched and our strength renewed for another day of bearing witness to your word in the world. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

If I were a film maker, although this scene takes place high up on a mountain top, I would probably exercise a little creative license and place the standoff between these prophets on a long dusty road. Clint Eastwood or Denzel Washington would play Elijah, six shooters at his side. And someone like Al Pacino would represent the prophets of Baal, guns filled with blanks, but filling the air with loud protests while Elijah waits watchfully. The streets would be lined with townspeople- women clutching babies- handkerchiefs pressed to mouths. Or perhaps this is too big to be contained by a sound stage, perhaps it should be on a high plateau in Tibet with Robert Duvall as the lead. Either way, this is an epic of grand proportions. I cannot even fathom this text in the hands of a preacher like Martin Luther or Johnathan Edwards who had a particular affinity for the fires of God raining down upon the land, consuming the offering and sentencing to death the false prophets. Those would be some fiery words indeed. Elijah takes center stage in a showdown with the prophets of Baal and emerges victorious-not for his many words but for the quiet strength of his prayer- it is one of his finest hours and we can't help but focus our attention on him. There is much to see in this amazing scene. There is much fodder to fuel any good fiery sermon for brimstone style preachers. But the humanity in this text, the easily overlooked story about disciples and gods is seen not in an erratic dance around an altar but in the faceless crowd on the sidelines. The subtext about discipleship is heard not in the frantic cries of the prophets but in the silence of the people Israel. This is a story about the faithfulness of God and courage of the prophet to be sure, but it is also a story about the journey of discipleship of a nation.

“How long will you limp between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” It was one of those pin drop moments, “But the people said nothing.” It was one of those moments like so many in the classroom when you pray the other guy will step up and answer the question or take the blame so the whole class won't get suspended, at the risk of losing face before the others. It was one of those moments when the people were called out before king and priest, singled out to take a stand for their convictions, when all other lights on the stage go dark except for a single beam from the back that is concentrated in soul-piercing clarity upon the player Israel in center stage and the whole audience hangs on their seats for a word. Any word. A single word of commitment or allegiance or devotion, a single word of preference even, “But the people said nothing.” So the cosmic director nods his head and agrees to move on to the next act where he will lay bare before all the raw facts about God and holy power. The people said nothing. How soon we forget those words, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is your God”, “For I shall be your God, and you shall be my people” “I will bring you up from Egypt, a land of misery, into a land flowing with milk and honey.” “How long will you limp between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing. Like Thomas who would not believe unless he had seen, the people stand in silence and find their

words only when an occasion for proof arises and the question comes down to a matter of choice. If we're looking for humanity to rear its head along the path of discipleship, we've found it in the singular silent voice of the crowd that echoes for generations of disciples.

It is perhaps no surprise that the Israelites, having received such a promise as the extension of a covenant from Yahweh should give pause when confronted with the question of choice. Baal was representative of many gods of fertility and delights of the world, among other things, whose worship included temple prostitution. If there could have been bumper stickers at the time they might have read Baal worshippers have more fun. But he also represented the god of water and sun, things essential for the fulfillment of daily needs like a healthy crop. Is it any wonder the Israelites waffled on who to throw their bets in with? Wouldn't it be safer to simply live with an allegiance to both gods, with a foot in both worlds of commitment as it were wax? This question of choice is perhaps not so foreign to us, though often the lines are not as clearly drawn as those between the god that can bring down fire to consume the offering, and the ones who cannot. The lines for us more likely look much like they must have appeared to the Israelites as Elijah stood before them and called them out. If the Lord is God follow him, if Baal, then follow him. The Lord God promises to supply all our needs. But there are many other lower case 'g' gods that claim to be suppliers of all we could ever want. The Lord God tells us not to worry about tomorrow for today has enough worry for itself. But there are other voices that compete to help us secure our future- if that is even possible. The Lord God says that in Christ our joy will be complete, but how many times have we read over and over the list of all the things we require to make us happy. Jesus says to love the Lord with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself, but the world says to love your self above all others and do what it takes to get ahead. No, we do not run the risk of idolatry or pagan worship in the classic sense of the term, but we are confronted with a pantheon of deities of the world that demand our allegiance, insist there is only one choice that lies in our choosing them. Perhaps like the Israelites standing on the sidelines of this divine showdown, the nature of our own need is so great that we feel we must keep the door of our loyalties open to other possibilities for provision incase God doesn't come through or it looks like we are going to get a better offer? Don't we too find ourselves speechless at times when we are asked, how long will you limp between two opinions?

Like Jesus showing of himself to Thomas, the Israelites' silence occasions a demonstration of God's presence in faithfulness and in power, a demonstration that excites them to faith. Their silence is dubious and even a bit indicting. But a work of grace is evident even in this, as their consent to bear witness to the burden of proof is inadvertently and act of faith in the Lord because God can't lose in any contest. God does not stand for divided loyalties but, like Jesus to Thomas, provides the proof of faith the people require, and the proof of his presence makes the choice for God irresistible. It took a pillar of fire to draw Israel to allegiance to God- an allegiance that lasted them about until the end of that day, as God time and again continues to reveal himself to Israel to draw them to faith. What do we require for our faith? What showdowns to we propose to God and how long does the power of proof last before we again feel the beckoning of familiar voices filled with empty promises? When we stand with the crowd gathered in search of a sign, how will we respond to the call to faithfulness to God and none other, even when other alternatives seem more practical or popular? We have not seen fire from heaven, but the proof of God's amazing love is this: Christ crucified and resurrected for our sins. What will you say when you are called out before boss and coworker, before board

member, before children, called out before the powerful or lowly, before friend, or enemy, priest or prophet? Called out to take a stand. Called to assess the requirements of your own faith. Called to make a choice. The proof has been provided. God will prevail. What will you say? If the Lord is God, follow him.