

In the leadup to today's story, which takes place in the breakaway northern kingdom of Israel, King Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, have been pursuing their own version of "drain the swamp" with regard to the prophets of God. Jezebel was a Phoenician princess, a worshiper of Baal, and when she brought Baal-worship with her the prophets frowned on that. So Ahab and Jezebel have been systematically killing the prophets of Yahweh, and at this point Elijah is just about the only one left.

Also in the leadup Elijah had pronounced a three year-long drought on the land in God's name because of this misrule by Ahab. Things have gotten so desperate that Ahab actually sent one of his courtiers to search the land for grasses to feed the livestock so they wouldn't die. And it's at this desperate point that Elijah decides to emerge from hiding and present himself to Ahab, which is probably why Ahab addresses him as "you troubler of Israel." "No, no," says Elijah, "*You* are the troubler of Israel, because you've forsaken the commandments of God and followed the Baals. And he challenges the representatives of Baal to a showdown.

Now, the narrator gives a great deal of attention to the details of this showdown, which led me to think that they were important. So I'm going to give them a lot of attention too. The contest is, whose god will send down fire from heaven to cook the sacrificial bull? Will it be Baal, who is pictured carrying a bolt of lightning and a drum for thunder, or will it be Yahweh, who is . . . not pictured? Elijah gives the prophet of Baal every advantage. There are 450 of them and only one prophet of Yahweh, the rest having been assassinated. Fine; he'll compete with 450. They can go first, so they have all day, or however long it takes to prove their power. They can choose the bull and prepare the altar to their liking, as long as they don't set the fire themselves. Nobody can claim that Elijah took any advantages.

As we heard, the prophets of Baal prepare the altar and call on their god, but there is no answer. At noon Elijah starts trash-talking the other team: “Oh, maybe Baal is meditating, or he’s on a trip. Maybe he went to sleep and you’re just not loud enough to wake him up.” So they escalate their appeals to Baal, going so far as to cut themselves bloody to get his attention. Still nothing. Finally they have to stop, and Elijah steps up.

Here’s what Elijah does to prepare the sacrifice: He gets all the people to come closer and watch carefully. He rebuilds the altar of Yahweh that Ahab had torn down, and he rebuilds it with twelve stones. Why twelve stones? Well, obviously, one for each of the tribes of Israel, each of Jacob’s sons, but also because after the Hebrew people had crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, Joshua erected twelve stones in the river as a holy place to God. “Twelve stones” is a way to remind those with memories that their God has an ageless covenant with them and is always leading them where they need to go. Elijah doesn’t have to say a word; they know what he’s evoking.

Then he makes a trench around the altar, piles up the firewood, lays the sacrificial bull on the wood, and has them *drench the bull and the wood with water*. First of all, it’s a three-year drought, so that was crazy reckless and wasteful, almost as if he didn’t have to worry about where water came from. Second, of course, soaked wood won’t catch fire unless a very great power wants it to. And of course, when Elijah invokes Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, the fire of God falls and consumes the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, so that all the people fall down and say, Yes indeed, this god is the real God.

So, there you have it. Ahab may be king, he may be able to kill the prophets of Yahweh, but his wife’s Baal prophets are just pathetic, and apparently so is Baal. With every factor in

their favor, they can't get their god to set the altar on fire, even when they shed their own blood to sweeten the deal. And on the other hand, Elijah may be a rough-edged old codger who lives in the wilderness, but by golly when he calls on heaven to send down fire, fire is what he gets, in the name of the liberating God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The only problem is, I bet if you and I went outside right now, built a beautiful altar according to specs, set a dead bull on it and called out to God to light it on fire, it wouldn't happen. In fact, that's the whole theory of the problem of suffering: if God cares so much about us, and is so powerful, why don't we get satisfying responses when we cry out for God to intervene? What does this story even prove?

I think our answer becomes clearer when we are aware of the bookends of this story. Right before Elijah came on the scene, Ahab married Jezebel, erected all these shrines to Baal, and following the custom of Baal's worshipers, when they built the city of Jericho they sacrificed a child to lay at its foundation. That is brutal and repugnant to the narrator of this story; it is representative of what your society will be or what it will produce if it belongs to Baal. At the end of this story, when God has vindicated Elijah by sending down fire onto the altar, Elijah #1 goes and slays all the prophets and #2 sends Ahab off to eat and drink (relax) because God is now bringing big black stormclouds that will end the drought. A society that worships Yahweh will be characterized by fecundity.

What I'm getting at is not that God does stunts on demand. I'm suggesting that the narrator is painting us a picture of what society looks like when it follows different gods. Remember how hard the priests of Baal worked to get Baal to light their pyre on fire: they limped around, they cried out, eventually they cut themselves. This is a god with whom you

can only have a transactional relationship: you sacrifice children, you hurt yourselves in order to get his attention. And what you get, besides his attention, is a society in which children get sacrificed.

Elijah's whole demonstration, with the twelve stones, is a reminder of their covenant with God and the character of God, which is one who delivers and liberates and provides. Even with all the odds against him, and without any bribes or incentives, Yahweh comes through for the people. So a community built on relationship with Yahweh will be one oriented toward covenant, toward neighborliness, toward finding a way through adversity without sacrificing anybody. I think the message about which god to choose is in the prophets' behavior, not in the response of their god. The message about which god to choose is in the society that god patronizes, if you will—one in which blood is shed as leverage, or one in which everybody remembers the stone that represents their tribe, and which other stones supported it, and which stones it supports, and how all of them stand together at a holy place in a river because God led them across to start a new life.

Early in today's reading Elijah asked the people themselves, not King Ahab, whether they were going to choose to worship Baal or Yahweh, telling them, You can't do both. The people did not answer, because I think they were afraid. It's hard to see, in the presence of a brutal king, how one can commit to the god that the king hasn't chosen. But right there in the dilemma is the answer: if you're afraid of the king who worships Baal, then you're not safe, or you're not living abundantly, under that god. That god does not produce *shalom*. After Elijah rebuilds the altar of the God who has always been committed to them, the people have no hesitation in saying, "Yahweh indeed is God."

I hesitated before using the word “safe,” because it’s not like we’re that safe under God either. God leads the faithful into scary places sometimes. But I did use it, because what I really meant was that God is faithful. God is in covenant with us, not in a transactional relationship, and even in the valley of the shadow of death God accompanies us. Remembering the character of God as one who is committed to us helps us to stand up and resist when opposing powers want to sacrifice children or reduce all relationships to exchanges of goods and services, or see other human beings primarily as assets or debits. Remembering God as the one who covenants with us is how we are able to live out of the truth that each person is chosen and infinitely precious, and to seek ways for all persons to thrive.

God of Elijah, with great fire you made your presence known to the worshipers of Baal. Help us to resist the temptation to place our trust and faith in anything other than you. Receive our worship and strengthen our faith. Amen.