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*Moving Mountains:
Challenging our Cherished Heresies—Carmel*
I Kings 18

We are in the middle of a series on the great mountains of scripture. Sometime after Easter, we will visit one of my favorite New Testament mountains—the Mount of Transfiguration. Just before Jesus turns toward Jerusalem for the last time, he has the most remarkable mountaintop experience with Peter, James and John. As they are standing there, Jesus begins to glow like the sun. And suddenly, he is talking with two Old Testament figures. We don't know anything about their conversation but it's not hard to surmise: Jesus was on his way to be crucified and his Heavenly Father wanted to encourage him with a visit from two old friends. Maybe the conversation went something like this: "Jesus, you are doing great! You are in the home stretch. Hang in there. Be brave! Don't give up. You can do it. All of humanity is counting on you!"

So who were those two cheerleaders that greeted Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? Of all the Old Testament characters, which two did the Father send for this grand task of encouragement? You've already met one of them: the greatest Old Testament hero of all—Moses. The deliverer of Israel. The giver of the law. But who was the other person chatting with Jesus on that mountaintop? **Elijah.** The greatest of Old Testament prophets. How great was he? Remember, John the Baptist was described as the second coming of Elijah. And when Jesus asked his disciples who people said he was, they replied, "Well, some say, 'Elijah.'" Elijah is mentioned 25 times in the gospels, more than any other prophet. If you wanted to sum up all the prophets in the Old Testament with one word, you would just say, "Elijah." That's how great he was.

We just spent last two weeks with Moses on Mt. Sinai and Mt. Nebo. The **next** two weeks we will spend with Elijah. And our first experience with Elijah may be the most spectacular mountaintop experience in the Bible: Mt. Carmel. Let me set the stage.

More than 500 years have passed since Moses died on Mt. Nebo. The Israelites entered the Promised Land and began to subdue it. For a time they were faithful to God's call to rid the land of idolatry. But hundreds of years passed and soon, Israel didn't look any different than their pagan neighbors. Their kings became more and more corrupt. And one of the worst of the lot was an awful man named Ahab married to an even **more** awful woman named—who?—Jezebel.

Listen to how the Bible describes Ahab. **“Ahab ...did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of [the kings] before him.... He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.”**

And while Ahab was busy building a temple to Baal and setting up Asherah poles on the hills of his kingdom, guess how Jezebel was filling her time? Her hobby was killing the prophets of Yahweh. This is how scripture sums it up: **There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife.**

So guess which king Elijah was sent to! Yep! It was time for a showdown. Buckle up, we are about to read one of the most exciting stories in the Bible.

[Start with 17- "When [Ahab] saw Elijah..."]

If you grew up in Sunday school you've heard about Baal worship. But who or what was Baal? Actually, Baal was a catchall word to describe a number of different gods. Baal was a male fertility god. Sometimes, it was also known as the Storm God. Baal worship included human sacrifice. How many of you are firstborn sons? If your parents had been worshippers of Baal, you wouldn't be here. As the firstborn, you would have died in the red hot arms of a bronze idol. Asherah was the fertility goddess and was symbolized by huge poles—wooden phallic symbols—that were set up on hilltops throughout the land. The worship of both Baal and Asherah included temple prostitution.

Are you getting the idea? Idolatry, promiscuous sexual behavior disguised as worship, child sacrifice...this was horrible stuff. When God sent the people into Canaan, he ordered them to wipe out all of these religious cults. But they didn't do it. Instead, they became "syncretistic." Say "**syncretism.**" Syncretism means the combining together of various—often conflicting—religious beliefs. The people of Israel believed in Yahweh, yes. But they also came to enjoy their fertility gods. And they didn't see any problem with hedging their religious bets. A temple to Yahweh, sure. But why not a temple to Baal, too, and a few Asherah poles thrown in for good measure? Why couldn't all these gods live together as one big happy divine family?

Except, by the time of Ahab, and with Jezebel's murderous influence, the prophets of Yahweh were being wiped out and the prophets of Baal and Asherah were multiplying. It was Elijah's job to confront them. How scary was that? **Everyone stand up.** All of this room full—there were more prophets of Ba'al and Asherah on Mt. Carmel that day than this entire audience. *[Pick one person to come up on the chancel.]* Now, this is how many prophets of Yahweh there were. He—against all of you! Scary, huh?

How many of you have ever seen *Bobby Flay's Throwdown* on the Food Channel? Bobby goes head to head with some famous chef on their cooking specialty. Well, this is Elijah's throwdown. They are going to have a big barbecue. He lets the Baalites pick the bull they want to sacrifice. And here's his challenge: they'll lay wood for a sacrificial fire on their altar, put their bull on that wood, but not light it. Then, they will call on their god, Baal, to light it for them. He's got an advantage here, right? He **is** the Storm God, after all. If the Storm God can't send down a bolt of lightning, who can?

So, the Baalites—all 450 of them—went for it. After preparing the altar, they began calling out to Baal... for hours! "O Baal, answer us," they shouted. But no response. They went until noon—for hours—still nothing. So, they decided to throw in a little dancing. Can you imagine—450 prophets dancing around this altar calling out to Baal. Still nothing. So, Elijah decides to be helpful. Around noon, he starts offering advice. *[I love this part!]* "Shout louder! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." The sarcasm is pretty thick, but the English translation doesn't do it justice. Do you see where it says, "Perhaps, he is busy..."? Literally, it means, "Perhaps he is having a bowel movement." Maybe your god is on the toilet and can't be disturbed, or can't hear you. Shout louder!

As if they don't realize that they are being mocked, they do what Elijah says. They start screaming at the top of their lungs. Then, they slice themselves with knives so that the blood begins to flow—another form of worship for their bloodthirsty god. More and more frantic—for hours—now they are exhausted and weakened because of loss of blood and their throats are hoarse, and still nothing. Finally, they collapse in a heap of exhaustion.

Now it's Elijah's turn. He calls the people closer to him so that they can see what he is doing. *[Act this out.]* He rebuilds the altar of the Lord using 12 stones to remind them of their heritage as the twelve chosen tribes of Yahweh. Then he digs a huge ditch around the altar and lays the wood and places the sacrifice on top of it. He orders 4 jugs filled with water. *[Pour]* He does this three times—four times three equals twelve... more symbolism. Then, when it is absolutely soaked, what does he do? He prays. No screaming. No dancing. No ranting. No slicing. No dicing. He prays. **"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."**

And then—fire. Lightning, maybe. Fire falls from heaven and **consumes** the sacrifice. But not just the sacrifice. The wood, too. And the stones. And the soil. It even consumes the water in the moat. And after the fire falls, what else falls? The people! They fall to their faces and cry out, "The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God!" Then victorious Elijah commands them to seize the Baalites and take them down into the Kishon Valley and slaughter them. All 450!

Wow! Powerful stuff, huh? So here's my question: **What heresy does Mt. Carmel challenge?** Each of the mountains we have climbed challenges a cherished heresy of our American culture. What heresy does Carmel challenge? Maybe it's the heresy of "All religions are the same." Oprah and the Dalai Lama and millions of other Americans would make that claim. But one thing Mt. Carmel seems to declare is that God doesn't think all religions are the same. Maybe it's the heresy of "free sex without consequences." Fertility gods and goddesses, temple prostitution, the religion of that day certainly gave permission for unfettered, guilt-free sex. Even today, our own denomination is tearing itself apart in a battle over sex without boundaries. Or maybe it's the heresy of child sacrifice. Our American culture can't afford to be too appalled at this story about child sacrifice since we have aborted 53 million babies since 1973.

It could be any of those things, but here is what I think Elijah was standing against that day on Mt. Carmel. [*Straddle modesty panel.*] Here it is. What? Straddling the fence. Living spiritually wishy-washy lives. I think Mt. Carmel cries out against the **heresy of indecision**. Look again at what Elijah said to them. "How long will you waver between two opinions?" The word "waver" can be translated "limp" or "wobble." It's the image of a drunkard walking along the sidewalk, weaving from side to side, never knowing where he is or where he's going.

Israel can't make up her mind! Should she follow Yahweh? Sure, why not? But what about Ba'al. Oh, okay. And how about Asherah. Sure, sounds good. **Waver, waver, wobble, wobble, limp, limp—from one opinion to the other.** And Elijah screams, "Make up your mind!" If Yahweh is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him! But choose! Get off the fence! Stop wobbling!

This isn't the only time in scripture that God calls his people to a point of decision. When Joshua readied the people for the Promised Land, this is what he said:

¹⁴"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.
¹⁵But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Jesus said the same thing: **"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other."** But Jesus' most powerful words against indecision come in Revelation. Do you remember these words to the Laodiceans? (Revelation 3)

¹⁵**I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!** ¹⁶**So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.**

Our American culture is stricken with indecision about spiritual and moral things. People wobble between opinions about God and Jesus and about the way we should live. We bow our knee before the god of tolerance and choose to live in a spiritual fog, hoping that everything will work out in the end but with no real idea how or why it might.

But honestly, I think much of the Church is in the same place today, don't you? I wonder if scores of us this morning—if we were really honest—would have to admit that we, too, are wobbling our way through life. When we are here on a Sunday morning, we wobble towards Jesus. But when we go to work or school the next day, we wobble toward the gods of our culture—the gods of fertility and materialism and power. Truth be told, too many of us haven't really chosen to follow Christ recklessly. Truth be told, too many of us are living lukewarm spiritual lives.

Want to take a wobble test? Try this. Is **anyone** at your workplace aware that you are a follower of Jesus? Anyone at your school? Because you've talked to them about your faith or invited them to church or promised to pray for them or because they've seen a Bible on your desk? If no one around you during the week has a clue that you are a Christian...you might be wobbling. **Here's another:** If anyone got hold of your calendar and combed through it, how much evidence would they discover that you are a fired-up follower of Christ? Would they find your weekly LifeGroup or Bible study? Would they see a mission trip to Mexico or Guatemala or to the streets of Tacoma? Would they find any time set aside in the morning to pray and study God's Word? Would they find regular time devoted to being with your family? **If not, you might be wobbling.** Or what if someone got into the history file of your computer? Would the sites that you have visited in the last month be a witness of your godly character or a humiliation to you? **Or what if** someone got hold of you check book register and perused it? Would there be any evidence—any evidence at all—by the way you spend your money, that Jesus is really the Lord of your life and of your pocketbook? If not—wobbly!

Do you know what I think might be the scariest verse in this whole passage? The last sentence in verse 21. Elijah makes this impassioned plea to follow God, to make a decision one way or the other—to choose. And then we read these words. Look at them. "But the people said nothing." If Yahweh is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him! But get off the fence. Make your decision. Choose! "But the people said nothing!" This silence kills the church.

What will we say? What do you say? As for me and my house—we will serve the Lord.

*[On the topic of other faiths, a sermon I preached on that subject and the booklet *The Big Questions*, are available in the narthex.]*

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. Read the entire Mt. Carmel story; enjoy it together. What pieces of that story jump out at you?

2. Have you ever heard anyone say, "All religions are the same?" How did you respond to that? How does Elijah's story speak to such a claim?

3. Verse 21 as a searing indictment of the people. How are these charges true for our culture, perhaps even some within our church, too? What is one thing you could do to get off the rail?