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## *The Story: God's Messengers* 1 Kings 17-19; Hosea; Amos

Well, the Vikings gave the Seahawks a new lease on life, didn't they? With 23 seconds left, it looked like our season was over, and then came "the kick." Unbelievable, right? I was curious how this he could miss such a short kick... turns out, there was more to it. If you look carefully, you'll see what really happened. But imagine what Blaire Walsh was feeling! He was the loneliest guy on earth, don't you think? This week we meet someone else who felt like he was standing all by himself in the biggest game of his life... and he was right!

We continue our year-long journey through *The Story*. Last week we read how God's nation was divided after Solomon died. Now there were two nations, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, with two sets of kings. Judah had 21 kings and one queen, and out of all of them only five had real hearts for God. In Israel, it was worse. How many good kings did Israel have? Not one! 150 years and not one good king, and the worst of the bunch was Ahab along with his evil, awful queen, Jezebel.

Listen to how the Bible describes him:

"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... 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."

But despite their awful leaders, God hadn't given up on his people. Over the centuries he sent messengers to speak against the idolatry of their time and to invite God's people back to himself. What were these messengers called? Prophets. And the greatest prophet of all was a guy named Elijah. So guess which king God sent Elijah to confront? Ahab. Finally, God had had enough and sent Elijah to challenge him to a duel... 450 prophets of Baal against one Elijah. It was like *High Noon*, Gunfight at the Carmel Corral. So buckle up; we are about to read one of the most exciting contests you will find in the Story. (From the Message 1 Kings 18:20)

<sup>20</sup>So Ahab summoned everyone in Israel, particularly the prophets, to Mount Carmel.

<sup>21</sup>Elijah challenged the people: “How long are you going to sit on the fence? If God is the real God, follow him; if it’s Baal, follow him. Make up your minds!” Nobody said a word; nobody made a move.

<sup>22</sup>Then Elijah said, “I’m the only prophet of God left in Israel; and there are four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. <sup>23</sup>Let the Baal prophets bring up two oxen; let them pick one, butcher it, and lay it out on an altar on firewood—but don’t ignite it. I’ll take the other ox, cut it up, and lay it on the wood. But neither will I light the fire. <sup>24</sup>Then you pray to your gods and I’ll pray to God. The god who answers with fire will prove to be, in fact, God.” All the people agreed.

<sup>25</sup>Elijah told the Baal prophets, “You go first.” <sup>26</sup>So they took the ox, prepared it for the altar, then prayed to Baal. They prayed all morning long, “O Baal, answer us!” But nothing happened—not so much as a whisper of breeze. Desperate, they jumped and stomped on the altar they had made.

<sup>27</sup>By noon, Elijah started making fun of them: “Call a little louder—he is a god, after all. Maybe he’s off meditating somewhere or on the toilet or maybe he’s on vacation. You don’t suppose he’s overslept, do you, and needs to be waked up?”

<sup>28</sup>They prayed louder and louder, cutting themselves with swords and knives—a ritual common to them—until they were covered with blood. <sup>29</sup>This went on until well past noon. They used every religious trick they knew to make something happen on the altar, but nothing happened—not so much as a whisper.

<sup>30</sup>Then Elijah told the people, “Enough of that—it’s my turn.” He put the altar back together for by now it was in ruins. ...Then he dug a trench around the altar. <sup>33</sup>He laid firewood on the altar, cut up the ox, put it on the wood, and said, “Fill four buckets with water and drench both the ox and the firewood.” <sup>34</sup>Then he said, “Do it again,” and they did it. Then he said, “Do it a third time,” <sup>35</sup>and they did it a third time. The altar was drenched and the trench was filled with water.

<sup>36</sup>Then Elijah came up and prayed, “O God, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, make it known right now that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I’m doing what I’m doing under your orders. <sup>37</sup>Answer me, God; O answer me and reveal to this people that you are God, the true God, and that you are giving these people another chance at repentance.”

<sup>38</sup>Immediately the fire of God fell and burned up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dirt, and even the water in the trench. <sup>39</sup>All the people saw it happen and fell on their faces in awed worship, exclaiming, “God is the true God! God is the true God!”

<sup>40</sup>Elijah told them, "Grab the Baal prophets! Don't let one get away!" They grabbed them. Elijah had them taken down to the Brook Kishon and they massacred the lot.

You've heard me teach about the fertility gods. "Baal" was a catch phrase for these various gods. Remember, Baal temples were often places of prostitution, sometimes places of child sacrifice, and usually built on the "high places." So where does Elijah summon the Baal priests for this showdown? Mt. Carmel. Their turf.

This is like Bobby Flay's *Throwdown*. Elijah challenges all 450 Baal priests: "Choose your bull, slaughter it, lay it on the wood... but don't set fire to it. Then, call on your god Baal to light it for you." So they did, and all 450 of them began to pray. But nothing happened. They went on for hours... still nothing. They threw in some vigorous dancing—450 prophets doing River Dance on top of the altar, screaming their prayers in desperation—still nothing. Elijah offered some helpful advice. "Shout louder! Maybe he's meditating somewhere or on the toilet or maybe he's on vacation."

They scream at the top of their lungs. They slice themselves with knives. It goes on for hours. More and more frantic—weakened by blood loss, throats raw from screaming—but still nothing. Finally...after hours of this bedlam, they collapse in exhaustion.

Now it's Elijah's turn. He calls the people closer. He rebuilds the altar, and then he digs a ditch around it, lays the wood and places the sacrifice. He orders 4 jugs water poured on the altar; he does it three times. Then, when it is absolutely soaked, he prays. No screaming, dancing, ranting, slicing or dicing. "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."

Then the fire fell out of heaven and consumed the sacrifice, and the wood, the stones, the soil, and even the water in the trench. Something else fell, too. The people! They fell to their faces and cried out in terror, "The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God" Then, at Elijah's command, they seized the Baalites, drug them down into the Kishon Creek and slaughtered every one of them... 450! The Kishon ran red that day.

I have stood on Mt. Carmel many times. On the top stands a statue of Elijah in his courageous, solitary battle against the prophets of Baal. Every time, it inspires me. But we are not studying the Story just to be stirred. We are studying it to be changed. There are two ways this story speaks to me, and therefore to you, today.

First, it is a cry to God's people to stand against a sexualized, idolatrous culture. Is our society any less obsessed with sex, any less idolatrous, any less willing to sacrifice our babies on the altar of convenience and pleasure? We might not call our idols Baal, but we are awash in a culture that worships sex and pleasure and we,

the people of God, are becoming more and more numb to it all. To God's people who are being sucked into the idolatry of this day, Elijah's words in verse 21 ring out: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

Do you see that word "waver"? It can be translated "limp" or "wobble." It is the image of a drunk weaving along the sidewalk from side to side, never knowing where he is or where he's going. Elijah cried out against people who were living wobbly, wishy-washy spiritual lives. Israel couldn't make up her mind! Should she follow Yahweh? Sure, why not? Or what about Ba'al? Oh, okay. How about Asherah? Sounds good. Wobble, wobble, wobble... from one opinion to the other. And Elijah cries out, "Make up your mind!" If Yahweh is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him! But choose! Get off the fence! Stop your pathetic wobbling!

This isn't the only time in the Story that God calls his people to a point of decision. Remember Joshua? "...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."

Even harsher words come from Jesus in Revelation 3. <sup>15</sup>"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.'

Our American Church is stricken with indecision about spiritual and moral things. We wobble between opinions about 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.

I wonder how many of us this day, if we were honest, would admit that we, too, are wobbling our way through life? When we are here on Saturday/Sunday, we wobble towards Jesus. When we go to work or school the next day, we wobble toward pagan gods of materialism and sexuality and power. Truth be told, too many of us haven't chosen to follow Christ unwaveringly. Too many of us are living lukewarm, wobbly spiritual lives.

Want to take a wobble test? Try this. Is anyone at your workplace or school aware that you are a Christian because you've shared your faith or invited them to church or promised to pray for them? If no one around you has a clue you are a believer, you are probably a wobbler. Or this. If someone got ahold of your calendar, what evidence would they discover that you are follow of Christ? Would they find your LifeGroup or Bible study? Would they see a mission trip to Mexico or time set aside for prayer? If not, you might be a wobbler. What if someone accessed your computer history? Would the sites you visited last week be a witness to your godly

character or a humiliation? Or if someone got hold of your check book, would there be any evidence at all—by the way you spend your money—that Jesus is the Lord of your whole life including your pocketbook? If not, you're a wobbler, limping along side to side.

If you were to walk away from here saying, "You know what, I am a wobbler. I need to live a more consistent, courageous Christian life... in how I treat my wife, how I speak on the golf course, how I behave with my boyfriend, how I spend my money..." If because of this story we had a less wobbly church, that would be awesome!

But I want to call us to more. This is also a story of how one courageous person can make a difference. One person like this student in Tiananmen Square during the democracy protests of 1989; or this one person, Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Peace Prize winner who, at the age of 12, wrote an article against the Taliban and nearly died from an assassin's bullet to the head; or the singular courage Martin Luther King, Jr. I once stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel where King was shot down in 1968 at the age of 39, but not before his words had shifted the tide of race relations in this country. These lone, courageous souls stood in protest against the evil of their time.

When we think of the word, "prophet," we think of someone who can predict the future, and the Bible prophets did some of that. But do you know what their primary job was? To speak God's truth. To speak the truth of God, regardless of situation or audience, and let the chips fall where they may. The biblical prophet was not primarily a "foreteller", he was a "forth-teller"—a proclaimer of God's word. Now how is it that these individuals were able to hear and speak God's truth so powerfully? God filled them with his Spirit. In a time when the Holy Spirit was given sparingly—to a few people and only for a season—these prophets stood out as God's messengers.

Do you know what the difference is today? Every believer in Jesus has his Holy Spirit, and not just a little of him just for a time. We all have been filled with the Holy Spirit who gives us gifts, spiritual gifts, to do his work—including the gift of prophecy. Did you know that? You exercise the gift of prophecy when you speak the truth of God, even in a hostile setting, with words and power that you had no idea where they came from.

The Christian doctor who objects to the amoral approach to sex education in a high school and offers to teach on the subject, the man on a board of directors who objects to unethical practices, the leader who takes a stand against marijuana in his community... those are prophetic moments. When ordinary followers of Christ, filled with his Spirit, obey his prompting to speak His truth—even in antagonistic situations, even as a solitary voice—those are prophetic moments. And by the way, each of those I just mentioned are prophetic voices from within this church body.

Do you know what the Apostle Paul's most treasured spiritual gift was? Prophecy. He told the Corinthians, "Eagerly desire the spiritual gift of prophecy...". I Cor 14.1

I would love it if folks here today heard the call of Elijah to stop wobbling and start standing strong for what they claim to believe. But I would be ecstatic if every person here would say to the Lord, "I am willing to be your prophet; I am willing to speak your truth. I don't feel like I have the words, I don't know if I have the courage, but if you will empower me and fill me with your Spirit, I will stand and be heard... in my family, in my school, in my job, in my relationships."

I wonder, who are the prophets here this day? Who are the ones God will use to speak his truth to an idolatrous and broken world? May the Holy Spirit call forth courageous servants this day!