

## Thursday - No Idolatry

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, for forty days being put to the test by the devil. During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry. Then the devil said to him, "If you are Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf." But Jesus replied, "Scripture says:

*Human beings live not on bread alone.*

Then leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, "I will give you all this power and their splendour, for it has been handed over to me, for me to give it to anyone I choose. Do homage, then, to me, and it shall all be yours." But Jesus answered him, "Scripture says:

*You must do homage to the Lord your God, him alone you must serve.*

Then he led him to Jerusalem and set him on the parapet of the Temple. "If you are Son of God," he said to him, "Throw yourself down from here, for scripture says:

*He has given his angels orders about you, to guard you*

and again:

*They will carry you in their arms in case you trip over a stone.*

But Jesus answered him, "Scripture says:

*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

The devil has one last test for Jesus, one last attempt to derail the coming Kingdom of God. 'Jump from the highest point in Jerusalem, the pinnacle of the cult of Yahweh, and force God's hand to save you!' The devil takes Jesus to the holiest place in the Holy City, the Sanctum Sanctorum, and quotes scripture - Psalm 91- to persuade Jesus to make the apparent "leap of faith". Jesus resists, and one last time quotes Deuteronomy as his reason:

*Do not put Yahweh your God to the test as you did at Massah.*

What happened at Massah? We have two accounts: one in Exodus Chapter 17, and one in Numbers Chapter 20. The Exodus account runs like this:

The whole community of Israelites left the desert of Sin, travelling by stages as Yahweh ordered. They pitched camp at Rephidim where there was no water for the people to drink. The people took issue with Moses for this and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why take issue with me? Why do you put Yahweh to the test?" But tormented by thirst, the people complained to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt," they said, "Only to make us, our children and our livestock, die of thirst?" Moses appealed to Yahweh for help. "How am I to deal with this people?" he said. "Any moment now they will stone me!" Yahweh then said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, taking some of the elders of Israel with you; in your hand take the staff with which you struck the River, and go. I shall be waiting for you there on the rock (at Horeb). Strike the rock, and water will come out for the people to drink." This was what Moses did, with the elders of Israel looking on. He gave the place the names Massah and

Meribah (Trial and Contention) because of the Israelites' contentiousness and because they put Yahweh to the test by saying, "Is Yahweh with us, or not?"

Is Yahweh with us, or not? Show me proof! Because if Yahweh can't produce, I'm going to make a golden calf, or some serpents, or a mansion, or a flag, or a nuclear warhead - something I can see - and put my faith in that! When we put God to the test we are already idolaters, because we have already put ourselves at the center of our story, rather than God.

This is Jesus' test: whether or not he will put himself at the center of his story by jumping, and thereby put God in a subordinate role - God on Jesus' side. The same temptation confronts every one of us every day of our lives: the temptation to put our own projects first, relegating God to a supporting role.

Psalm 91, from which the devil quotes, locates the temptation for us neatly. When it is read from the margins of society, from the bottom of the pyramid, Psalm 91 reminds the reader that we are all under God's protection, and need not fear. Read from the top of society, from the pinnacle of power and wealth, the psalm begins to sound like confirmation of our entitlement to all good things, to our manifest destiny of victory and empire. And in fact, the psalm was read just that way in imperial Israel (short-lived as that was), and in every so-called Christian empire since. God is on our side.

Satan also locates the temptation by his choice of site: the parapet of Herod's Second Temple, the pinnacle of the religious, political, and economic pyramid of Israelite society. In our projects of aggrandizing wealth, power, and influence we are continually putting ourselves at the center of our story, claiming God's approval, blessing and important role in assisting the success of our own projects. God gets the Oscar for "Best Supporting Actor".

"Not So!" says Jesus, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

The third "pillar principle" of the Reign of God is "No idolatry." If it is to be really the Reign of God rather than the Reign of the Golden Calf or the Almighty Dollar or the nuclear umbrella, then God must be at the center, not anyone or anything else. We must cultivate single-pointed awareness, centering wholly on Yahweh. Putting our faith anywhere but with Yahweh is idolatry. Yahweh can not be fully and completely our God if we will not be fully and completely Yahweh's people.

As I prepared for this Bible Study several months ago, my friend Steve Baggaly and the rest of the Prince of Peace Plowshares activists were being tried and convicted in federal court for their prophetic actions at the Bath Shipyard in Maine. By hammering on the USS Sullivans and pouring their blood on the ship, the Plowshares activists were undertaking symbolic action to remind us all of the idolatry of placing our faith in weapons of mass destruction rather than on the guidance and protection of God. Steve and his wife Kim are founders of the Norfolk Catholic Worker House, and as such have undertaken voluntary poverty: they are without possessions of their own, depending on the generosity of others for their very survival. They are to my best perception the embodiment of a life without silos, kings, or idolatry - not the only life that embraces those principles, but surely a true life in the Reign of God. Their life is not only one of service to those on the periphery of society, but a life of prophecy to those of us nearer the center of the circles of power, possessions, and prestige. The truth they speak, by daily service, public demonstration and civil disobedience, is that our national love affair with weapons of mass destruction is idolatry. Pharaoh loves his chariots, but to non-Egyptians they are nothing more than idols, unable to protect us any more than a figurine

carved of stone or wood. Yahweh demands our full commitment, loyalty, and trust; the Reign of God won't work any other way.

Some 550 years after the Exodus, around 850 BC, another prophet without possessions or property confronted his national government about its idolatry, and received no warmer welcome than the Prince of Peace Plowshares. Elijah did not wait to be arrested and tried, but fled for his very life - after a most remarkable and dramatic showdown on Mount Carmel. Elijah's story dramatizes the exclusive relationship Yahweh wishes to have with each of us, and the divine power that such a covenant releases for our good.

Elijah's name means "Yah is El" - El being the general Semitic name for the high God. Hence Elijah's very name declares his mission: to declare that Yahweh is the one and only God.

Elijah's story is told in I Kings 18 - but the story actually begins in chapter 16, when King Ahab succeeds his father Omri and begins a reign of 22 years in Israel. At this time Asa, a devoted follower of Yahweh (for whom my son is named) was king in Judah. In contrast to Asa, Ahab is unfaithful to Yahweh, worshipping Baal and erecting a temple dedicated to him. I Kings records the story this way:

Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and reigned over Israel for twenty-two years in Samaria. Ahab son of Omri did what is displeasing to Yahweh, and was worse than all his predecessors. The least that he did was to follow the sinful example of Jeroboam son of Nebat: he married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and then proceeded to serve Baal and worship him. He erected an altar to him in the temple of Baal which he built in Samaria. Ahab also put up a sacred pole and committed other crimes as well, provoking the anger of Yahweh, God of Israel, more than all the kings of Israel his predecessors...

Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "By the life of Yahweh, God of Israel, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain these coming years unless I give the word."...

A long time went by, and the word of Yahweh came to Elijah in the third year, "Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the country." So Elijah set off to present himself to Ahab...

Obadiah went to find Ahab and tell him the news, and Ahab then went to find Elijah. When he saw Elijah, Ahab said, "There you are, you scourge of Israel!" "Not I," he replied, "I am not the scourge of Israel, you and your family are; because you have deserted Yahweh and followed Baal. Now give orders for all Israel to gather round me on Mount Carmel, and also the four hundred prophets of Baal who eat at Jezebel's table.

Ahab called all Israel together and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah stepped out in front of all the people. "How long," he said, "do you mean to hobble first on one leg and then on the other? If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him." But the people had nothing to say. Elijah then said to them, "I, I alone, am left as a prophet of Yahweh, while the prophets of Baal are four hundred and fifty. Let two bulls be given us; let them choose one for themselves, dismember it but not set fire to it. I in my turn shall prepare the other bull, but not set fire to it. You must call on the name of your god, and I shall call on the name of Yahweh; the god who answers with fire, is God indeed." The people all answered, "Agreed!" Elijah then said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one bull and begin, for there are more of you. Call on the name of your god but light no fire." They took the bull and prepared it, and from morning to midday they

called on the name of Baal. "O, Baal, answer us!" they cried, but there was no voice, no answer, as they prepared their hobbling dance round the altar which they had made. Midday came, and Elijah mocked them. "Call louder," he said, "for he is a god: he is preoccupied or he is busy, or he has gone on a journey; perhaps he is asleep and needs to be woken up!" So they shouted louder and gashed themselves, as their custom was, with swords and spears until the blood flowed down them. Midday passed, and they ranted on until the time when the offering is presented; but there was no voice, no answer, no sign of attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come over to me," and all the people came over to him. He repaired Yahweh's altar which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, corresponding to the number of tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of Yahweh had come, "Israel is to be your name," and built an altar in the name of Yahweh. Round the altar he dug a trench of a size to hold two measures of seed. He then arranged the wood, dismembered the bull, and laid it on the wood. Then he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." They did this. He said, "Do it a second time;" they did it a second time. He said, "Do it a third time;" they did it a third time. The water flowed round the altar until even the trench itself was full of water. At the time when the offering is presented, Elijah the prophet stepped forward. "Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel," he said, "Let them know today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, that I have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Yahweh, answer me, so that this people may know that you, Yahweh, are God and are winning back their hearts."

Then Yahweh's fire fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this they fell on their faces. "Yahweh is God," they cried, "Yahweh is God!" Elijah said, "Seize the prophets of Baal: do not let one of them escape." They seized them, and Elijah took them down to the Kishon, and there he slaughtered them.

Elijah said to Ahab, "Go back now, eat and drink; for I hear the approaching sound of rain." While Ahab went back to eat and drink, Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel and bowed down to the ground, putting his face between his knees. "Now go up," he told his servant, "and look out to sea." He went up and looked. "There is nothing at all," he said. Seven times Elijah told him to go back. The seventh time, the servant said, "Now there is a cloud, small as a man's hand, rising from the sea." Elijah said, "Go and say to Ahab, "Harness the chariot and go down before the rain stops you." And with that the sky grew dark with cloud and storm, and rain fell in torrents. Ahab mounted his chariot and made for Jezreel. But the hand of Yahweh had come on Elijah and, hitching up his clothes, ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

What has happened here? Yahweh sends a severe drought upon Israel, proclaimed by Elijah the Tishbite, who announces in the name of Yahweh that neither rain nor dew will fall in Israel until he gives the word. (That this drought actually occurred is confirmed by the Greek historian Menander of Ephesus, who records a great drought during the reign of Eithobaal, father of Ahab's wife Jezebel.) Ahab had probably married Jezebel to seal a trade agreement with her father; it is this connection with the Phoenicians, personified in Jezebel, that is blamed for the introduction of Baal-worship to the royal house and Israel at large. Jezebel thus seems to have gotten an unfair rap - she did nothing wrong, other than to continue to be faithful to the religious traditions in which she was raised and taught.

The Baals are local fertility gods, worshipped at every village shrine. They are all local manifestations of the great sky-god Baal, who controlled the weather and therefore gave

or withheld fertility. Baal gets all the advantages in this contest: 450 prophets to one, hours of incantation to one short petition, and the location is on the border of Baal's native land and far from Mt. Sinai. Even the context of the challenge is Baal's specialty: the drought which has plagued Israel for three years is the result of dry weather, which should be Baal's forte.

The point of the contest is that the god who answers the call, by bringing fire down on the sacrifice, is the real God, who will then be expected to end the drought by bringing rain. Surely this was right up Baal's alley - but in spite of the impressive display of the 450 priests of Baal, "there was no voice; no one answered, no one heeded."

Elijah seems to have presented a very calm, confident demeanor as he went about rebuilding the altar which had been thrown down. Pouring water on the altar seems to our ears to be showmanship, but in Elijah's time was a form of sympathetic magic: make rain fall on the land as we have poured water on the sacrifice. Repeating the action three times helped ensure the magical effect. Elijah is making a symbolic statement that the old ways of Yahweh, the desert God of Israel, are effective, while the more spectacular show of Baal's prophets is not.

Yahweh's fire falls on Elijah's sacrifice in impressive fashion. Vindication for the persecuted righteous prophet and spectacular punishment for the wrongdoers! Elijah metes out the punishment of the times for losing such a contest by murdering all the opposing prophets of Baal - although considering the logistics of the situation, this may be hyperbole on the part of the story-tellers. Finally, Yahweh intervenes to end the drought, using divine power to create rain out of nothing to ease the suffering of the Israelites, who have once again acknowledged that Yah is El - Yahweh is God.

**The principle of non-idolatry means God first, foremost, and only.** Elijah's story dramatizes that following God requires total commitment - no divided loyalties or hearts. This is not a contest to see who is lord of the mountain, or who is stronger, Yahweh or Baal: it is a test to see who is God. Monotheism is Elijah's claim. There is no God but Yahweh.

Elijah reproaches Ahab (and through him, the people of Israel): How long will you hobble between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered not a word. We are faced with the same situation, and must wrestle with the same question - how long will we hobble between two opinions? The writers of I Kings had one great theme - monotheism. The point of the Elijah cycle is to teach the benefits of belief in only one God, Yahweh, and the costs of any other belief. A divided loyalty costs us double, as our attentions and energies are split into different, and often conflicting, camps. Our own life reflects the image Elijah presents of hobbling first on one foot, then the other - a sort of hopping made even more difficult by the hobble that keeps our feet unnaturally close together. We may not have been present on Mt. Carmel for Elijah's rather dramatic demonstration, but equally convincing demonstrations - because more personal - surround us every day. "Had we but the eye of faith" as Bill Tabor has written, we would see these examples all around us.

There is a fear expressed among many liberal persons that single-pointed devotion to God (as God is experienced by Christians) means that one can not recognize or honor the truth in other religions, or respect their adherents. Over the centuries, many Christians have behaved as if this were true, with lamentable results. This does not have to be the case; and if we are truly worshipping God, rather than our conception of God, it will never be the case.

I cannot know what it is to love and be loved truly and completely until I commit my love to a single person over an extended period of time. Those of us who have been blessed in marriage can testify positively to the truth of this statement. If, like me before I married Susan, you have tried to find this deep love outside of an extended, faithful, monogamous commitment, you can join me in testifying negatively: it can't be done. The love of God is parallel to our love for that one special human being: we have to make that total, unreserved and undivided commitment to one revelation of God before we can learn and experience the divine love in all its fullness.

After I learned what true love is, then I could look around and see it everywhere. My ability to see and honor love everywhere in the world was enhanced, not diminished, by my undivided love for my wife Susan. Our experience of God is like that. When we have made the unreserved plunge into a covenant relationship with God, when we have experienced God directly and personally through that relationship - why then we look up and see God everywhere. My own ability to see and honor and be thankful for the way God is revealed to the followers of all the great religions - Islam, Hindu, Buddhist, Judaism, Taoism and the rest - is enhanced as my own relationship to God as encountered in my own faith tradition is deepened and strengthened.

The salad bar approach to spirituality - I'll have a little chanting from here, a little dietary advice from here, an icon from there and some moral teaching from over there - paradoxically does not deepen our ecumenical awareness or enhance our true spiritual growth. What happens is one ends up giving away a little of oneself at each station, never staying long enough or being present fully enough to enter into that great love relationship which is waiting only for our unguarded acceptance. Being human, one tends not to choose those salad bar items which might offer the greatest chance for true spiritual growth because they look distasteful, old-fashioned, or hard to swallow.

Elijah's image of hobbling, first on one foot and then another, is a wonderful description of the effect of divided loyalties. We can't step forward fully on either foot, because we are tied to the other which is walking a different path. Thousands of years have passed, but human nature is unchanged and Elijah's message is as valid and pertinent today as when he confronted Ahab. If we are to walk into the Reign of God, then God must be at the center of our life and our story, with no competing idols.

Monday night I spoke of encountering Yahweh in the burning bush as the profoundly "other". We can keep God at the center of our story and resist the temptations to put idols there instead only to the extent that we remember that God is Yahweh - a Power, not only a Presence, a Light, or a Guide. Elijah's story reminds us forcefully of just that: God is the ultimate Power - Creator of the Universe, willing and able to intervene in human affairs for the sake of the people of the creation. That we are made in the image of God reminds us at the same time that God also has the attributes of person, which enables us to enter into the deep personal relationship with God that seems so clearly to be the Divine desire.

We who live on the verge of the 21 st century have the advantage, to paraphrase Isaac Newton, of being able to stand on the shoulders of giants. Thanks to those who have gone before us and who have shared their learnings and experiences, we know - far better than the people of Old Testament times - that God is both immanent and transcendent. The common expression among Friends about "that of God in every one" would have been blasphemy to Elijah; but we know it to be blessed truth. I feel the touch of God within, and know it to be undeserved mercy, unmerited grace - and I expect I am not alone in this experience among those gathered here tonight.

However grateful we may be for this new truth, it does not nullify older truth, but expands and fulfills it. God did not give up divine transcendence when we discovered a divine guide within. Unfortunately, there is a modern tendency to fall into thinking that God is only interior to myself - a sort of personal guidebook that will help me make good choices, but powerless to affect the physical world. We are reluctant to pray for specific physical events in part because we are afraid that God can't really bring them about. Elijah's demonstration on Mount Carmel is a resounding rebuttal to that pattern of thought. Elijah is direct and dramatic in his action. "Here is Yahweh, God who is real and God who can do dramatic acts that no pretend-gods can. Believe in the real God, the true Power!" It is Baal who proves to be powerless to intervene in the physical world, and Yahweh who hears the call of one solitary prophet and displays divine power in the most dramatic of fashions. Finally it is Yahweh who produces a cloud out of nothing and ends the drought by bringing the rain down in torrents.

Yahweh, the God of all creation, of limitless power and infinite love, is pleased to give us the kingdom: to introduce us to the joys of the Divine Economy, to the peace of the Peaceable Kingdom, to the perfect life of the New Jerusalem, to the new heaven and new earth. The catch is that there is no catch: simply live in a way that allows Yahweh to provide. That means to live without silos, without kings, and with no idols to compete for the loyalty and faith which rightfully belong to Yahweh alone.