

Sermon: Hearing is Believing

Year C, Proper 4

[1 Kings 18:20-21,\(22-29\),30-39; Psalm 96; Galatians 1:1-12; Luke 7:1-10](#)

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Setting the context for 1 Kings 18:20-39

We're going to be doing what's called a semi-continuous reading from the books of First and Second Kings over the next six weeks. We won't read from cover to cover, but we will hit major highlights. I've written a really high level context for both 1st and 2nd Kings in your bulletin, so you can see where it fits into the Hebrew Bible.

One of the major issues that 1st & 2nd Kings is wrestling with is *how did things go so wrong from the great promise of King David to the point where we were conquered by Babylon?*. Haven't we all had moments in our own lives when we ask *how did I end up here?* Part of why I'm asking X to read the whole passage is because it is so full of details. Just like our lives are so full of details that sometimes we don't notice the big overarching motion of what is going on. Sometimes we pay so much attention to the details, we don't see where we're going. And sometimes we pay so much attention to the big view that we don't notice the small details that could redirect us onto a better path.

Today's reading begins with King Ahab gathering everyone together. King Ahab was married to Queen Jezebel, and between the two of them, they had introduced worship of Baal to the land of Israel. This was against the teaching of the God of Israel, who had said that they should have no other Gods. Elijah had warned the king that there would be three years of drought because they were worshipping Baal. Which is kind of ironic because Baal was the God of Storms and Rain.

At the end of those three years, Elijah has returned to the court. He's not the only prophet there. There are 450 prophets of Baal and 400 of Asherah, another goddess the Israelites have taken to worshipping. All of those prophets are all court prophets. Like many folks who work for the powerful, they appear to be very anxious to tell the king and queen what they want to hear.

1 Kings 18:20-21

So what is Elijah saying here? Pick! More importantly, what does he hear from the people? Silence. They aren't asking questions and seeking more information to make a decision. They want to avoid making a decision. They're keeping their options open. They think they have more chances for a better life if they don't commit to the God of Israel solely. But not committing to the God of Israel is deciding to go against the God of Israel. That is what it means to worship idols. It means that you worship other gods.

We may not call our idols "Baal." But we might call them "Senior Vice President of Business Development." Or "Jack Daniels". Or "Size 2". Or "My son in the NBA". We can have lives that are abundant and have God at the center of them. But we can't have God at the center of our lives when we worship other ambitions as well.

1 Kings 18:22-24

So Elijah proposes a kind of contest. They'll offer sacrifices to both gods and the one that answers with fire is the true God. Does he rig the contest? Yes. He rigs it in their favor. There

are 450 of them and only 1 of him. They get to pick the better bull, the one that will be a better sacrifice. They get to go first.

1 Kings 18:25-29

So this is description of the first round. Goes on for hours, from morning to mid-afternoon. They are calling out to Baal and nothing's happening. Elijah does a little trash talk at noon. Then the prophets of Baal begin to cut open their own skin, adding their blood to the blood of the bull they have sacrificed. They rave on, exhausting themselves, that word "rave" meaning the same thing we do today, about a dance rave. Physically exhausting themselves.

Oh yeah. How often have we exhausted ourselves before one of our pet idols? How often have we offered our own blood to an idol where we were never going to hear its voice, its answer, its response? Especially because we wanted to hear what *we* wanted to hear.

1 Kings 18:30-32

So what's Elijah doing here? He's creating a sacred space for his part of the contest to take place in. But what are the characteristics of that space? It's full of people. They're involved. There are twelve stones. Why? He's reminding the community of a time when their faith was strong and wholly committed to the God of Israel. He digs a trench around the altar, and we don't know why yet. But that *large enough to contain two measures of seed* (1 Kings 18:32) means it's really big.

For most of us, we don't need more sacred space. We need more sacred time. We need time to connect with our own histories, when we were on a better path, when we were connected to people heading in the right direction, when we heard things that connected us with our faith and the faith of our ancestors. And to get that time, sometimes we do have to dig a really big trench around it.

1 Kings 18:33-35

So there's been a drought for three years. Before they begin to pour the water, how likely is the wood to burn? Of course. So what is he doing by having them pour that water on the sacrifice and the wood? How many jars of water does he have them pour? 12, just like the stones, just the tribes of Israel. They've been in a drought for 3 years. What do they want the most? Right.

Think what this looks like to the prophets of Baal that are watching this. Elijah has the people working together. They're no longer individuals, each making up his or her own mind. He's making the sacred space so wet that the trench is full. So he's in effect pointing out how desiccated the rest of the world is around his sacred space. And he's made it completely unlikely that anything within that space will burn. To the 450 prophets of Baal, standing there tired and bloody, Elijah is taking completely illogical actions if what he wants to do is convince a bunch of individuals that the God of Israel is *the* God because fire appears. As far as they're concerned, this guy has to be an idiot.

How often do we hear of something someone else is doing and shake our heads? Instead of joining with others who are following their beliefs, we stand alone, making up our own minds. Instead of envisioning what a world would look like filled with God's presence, we kick the dust. Instead of looking for the possibility that God is ready to answer, we decide God can't possibly do anything more than what a standard issue human can manage.

1 Kings 18:36-37

Elijah just stands there and prays. No shouting. No shedding his own blood. No raving. He just prays.

Yeah. Maybe we should try that.

1 Kings 18:38-39

KABOOM! There is fire from water. The impossible is possible. Baal the God of the Thunderbolts doesn't show up. The God of Israel does.

So what lesson do we take from that? Prayers are always answered? Test God and God will always respond? Remember what the books of 1st and 2nd Kings are about. *How did things go so wrong?* At that moment, the people are flat on their faces, saying "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God." (1 Kings 18:39) They had a true prophet in their midst. They had a demonstration of God's presence in this world. And they still turned away later, and went back to their beloved idols.

Hearing is Believing

The people around Elijah saw the big miracle, the thunderbolt from the sky, the lightning strike that brought forth fire from water. But they loved their idols. They loved the ideas of their idols. They loved the idea that if you did X and then Y, you got Z every time. If you got a good bull and some dry wood and you shouted and spilled some human blood and basically wore yourself out, it would rain. And if it didn't rain, well, maybe there was something wrong with the bull or the wood or the way you shouted and ran around.

When you read the story of Jesus and the centurion, did you notice that they never met? The centurion never saw Jesus. But he heard of him and he asked for Jesus' help. First the centurion sent the Jewish elders, to convince Jesus to cure the centurion's slave. Then the centurion sends his friends to tell Jesus that coming to the centurion's house was not necessary. Jesus needed to only speak the word and healing would happen. And it did. And the two never met.

The centurion cared for his neighbors as himself, he contributed to the good of the community. He asked for help for someone who had no voice, who had no power. He honored the religious traditions of Jesus, by having Jewish elders speak on his behalf and by finding a tactful way to allow a Jewish teacher to avoid being contaminated by coming into a gentile home. But mostly he listened to what he heard of Jesus and he thought about what was right in his own life. When the centurion said, "Go", people went. When the centurion said, "Come," people came. That was how authority worked. So when someone who clearly had so much more authority than any human would ever have said the Word, the world changed. Maybe it wasn't a huge KABOOM!, but a slave regained health. The centurion had walked away from his idols. From all the idols. He never wavered from the Lord is God. He heard and he believed.