

Sermon – March 3, 2024
“The LORD indeed is God”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: 1 Kings 18:21-22, 30-39

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, move among us, fill us, and anoint the sharing of these words. May they be a blessing for your people that leads us on to life eternal and fruitful labor as we follow you into your mission field. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! Today is the third Sunday in the season of Lent. I pray that as we journey through Lent, we are finding time to come before God the Father and allow our hearts to be turned again to God. Let's visit a third altar in the Old Testament and see what new insights we might gain that will help us reclaim our altar for its purpose. Our third altar is found on top of Mount Carmel, one of the high places in the northern kingdom of Israel. It is a place where people once offered sacrifices and offerings to God, Adonai. The altar has been torn down, its stones scattered on the ground. This third altar has been forgotten by the people of the northern kingdom and replaced by a new altar not far away to a false god, Baal. Baal was a god of one of Israel's neighbors, the Phoenicians, who worshiped Baal as the god of fertility and rain. Baal is the god that Ahab's foreign wife Jezebel worships. And Ahab has led the people of the northern kingdom into worship of this false god. The stones of our third altar lay forgotten on the mountain top waiting to be reclaimed.

We enter into a time in the life of the northern kingdom of Israel, the ten tribes who split off and started their own worship of God, built their own worship places, and who are now in the midst of a three-year drought. They have entered the third year of a time with no rain, a time of drought that began when the prophet of God, Elijah, prayed for the rain to stop and it has not rained since he prayed. It is a time when there is famine in the northern kingdom and a time of searching for water. The king of the northern kingdom at this time is Ahab and he has been searching for Elijah to punish him or kill him so that there might be rain again in Israel. Elijah has been hidden by God from Ahab, but Elijah has now made his presence known on Mount Carmel. Elijah has told Ahab to call all of Israel and the prophets of Baal to come to the top of the mountain. Ahab has listened to Elijah and called the prophets of Baal and the people. Ahab calls Elijah the troubler of Israel because of Elijah's prayer and the lack of rain. Ahab's words point to his knowing that Baal is a false god of rain, as he blames Elijah and his God for there being no rain in Israel. So, the king of Israel, the people of Israel, and the prophets of Baal, the god of rain, have gathered on the mountain top to hear Elijah.

Elijah draws near to the people and asks them a question: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD, [Adonai,] is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."^{vi} The people do not answer Elijah; they are quiet. As Elijah has accused the people of the northern kingdom of being those who seek to live in two opinions, trusting the false god Baal and at times the real God, Adonai, so also, we today can be those who are seeking to live in two worlds. If we are not diligent, Elijah's words will convict us as well. In the season of Lent, we should reflect on Elijah's question and ask Holy Spirit to show us where we are people of two opinions, where we are accommodating the world's culture, and where we need to turn our hearts back to the living God, Adonai.

Elijah proposes a test to see which god is the true god, Baal or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. He proposes that two bulls be placed on two different altars as sacrifices but not burned, as a test. Elijah has the prophets of Baal go first and cry to their god and then later he will offer a bull to Adonai, and the god who answers by fire is the true god. When the people hear Elijah's proposal, they agree to his test, telling him he has "spoken well." Elijah has the prophets of Baal go first as there are many and he does not want them to be able to say that tomorrow Baal will accept their sacrifice. Elijah wants them to cry to Baal and for all to see if Baal will answer. One thing I will say about the prophets of Baal is that they have conviction.

They prepare their bull, place it on the wood, and begin to cry to their god; the test begins. The prophets of Baal are diligent. They call on the name of Baal from morning until noon but, as the scripture states, “there was no voice, no answer and no response.”ⁱⁱ No fire comes down from heaven to light the wood and burn their offering. At noon Elijah begins to encourage them, telling them to “Cry aloud that surely Baal is a god!” Elijah’s encouragement to the prophets of Baal is very snarky. He suggests that perhaps Baal is taking a nap or that he has gone to the bathroom or maybe on a vacation. Elijah encourages the prophets of Baal to try harder and they do, crying out, limping, or moving around their altar and even cutting themselves until their blood gushes out and is mingled with the blood of their sacrifice. Their conviction for their false god is high. We should see in their conviction the world’s conviction to follow the gods that are set up in our culture today. Those who advocate for the false gods of the world will not easily set aside their devotion to the false gods they serve. Those who are double minded, seeking to serve God and the world, will also have great difficulty setting aside the things of the world and turning to Jesus. We, in the season of Lent, should reflect on our own convictions and allow Jesus through Holy Spirit to identify our misplaced convictions, places where we are accommodating the world’s view in our lives and are not following the guidance of God. We are to seek to find such convictions and to turn from them and follow Jesus.

Watch how Elijah begins to change the test’s focus from the prophets of Baal to God. He calls the people closer, and now they come closer to him. Before, when he called to them, they stood at a distance and were silent. Now, the people are beginning to respond to the prophet of God when he calls to them. They have seen the prophets of Baal cry to their god and no fire has come. Elijah takes twelve stones that had been thrown down and repairs the altar of God. The twelve stones are for the sons of Jacob to whom the word of the LORD, Adonai, came. Elijah, with the use of the twelve stones, reminds the people that God gave them the name Israel, the name the northern kingdom now uses. With the stones, he builds an altar to the LORD, Adonai. The use of the twelve stones points to Elijah’s not just calling to the tribes of the northern kingdom but to all of the people of God. Notice that Elijah digs a trench around the altar, a large trench, and then has four water jugs full of water poured three times over the altar with its wood and bull. Elijah does not want there to be any doubt that Adonai is the source of fire that might come in response to his prayer. The wet wood will be hard to start to burn, adding to the difficulty of burning the sacrifice. Also, catch that the number twelve shows up a second time in

Elijah's actions as the altar is prepared. The four jars poured three times over the altar are twelve items as a source for water. The doubling of the number twelve in the text emphasizes that Elijah's words are for all of the tribes of Israel, northern and southern. The presence of water should also help us see a connection from this moment back in Israel's history to a time when the people of Israel came through the waters of the Red Sea as twelve tribes set free from cruel bondage in Egypt and became God's people. We should hear Elijah again calling the people to God, inviting them to freedom from bondage to a false god. We should also let the water remind us of our baptism and our coming into a relationship with God through Jesus. As Elijah has rebuilt this forgotten altar, we also continue to seek to reclaim the altar here for the purpose it was intended, a place to meet with God, a place to be in God's presence.

The altar is ready. It is the time of the evening sacrifice. The prophets of Baal are still crying out to their god. They may have one eye on what Elijah is doing and are desperate to see their false god respond with fire to prove that they are worshiping the true god, but still there is no voice, no answer, and no response from Baal. And when the time of the offering of the oblation arrives, Elijah moves near the altar and prays. Elijah's prayer is a prayer that during the season of Lent we might consider spending time praying and meditating on as it is a powerful prayer. "O LORD [Adonai], God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD [Adonai], answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD [Adonai], are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Let me encourage us to take time to pray this prayer and let Jesus open our hearts to be turned back to him. Let Elijah's prayer be a prayer that touches our hearts and turns them to the Father through Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit. Let Elijah's prayer touch whatever is found in our hearts that may have turned us from Jesus and give us pause to begin to turn it back to the one who loves us with such a great love that he would die for our sin. Elijah prays and Adonai answers with fire. The fire of Adonai falls and consumes the burnt offering, the bull, the wood, the twelve stones, the dust around the altar, and the water in the trench around the altar. Fire from heaven falls, the LORD, Adonai, the true God responds with fire. Elijah prays once and there is a response from the LORD, Adonai. The fire does not light up the wet wood on the altar and let it burn up the burnt offering; the fire from heaven consumes everything. And the people whom Elijah has asked to come closer, who see this great sight, fall on their faces and say, "The LORD, [Adonai] indeed is God; the LORD,

[Adonai] indeed is God.” The people of Israel worship the true God again at the altar on Mount Carmel. The hearts of those present are turning towards the LORD, [Adonai]. There are other times in the history of the people of God when fire falls from heaven. After setting Israel free from Egypt, God visits the people of Israel at Mount Sinai and we find fire on the mountain top. When Solomon dedicates the new temple in Jerusalem, we find fire from God consuming the offering on the altar, and at Pentecost, fire from heaven falls on the believers in Jesus, seen as tongues of flames that rest on the altars of the hearts of believers surrendered to him.

During the season of Lent, as we seek to be those who are coming before Jesus with an openness to be convicted of our sin, to have Holy Spirit touch those places where we are double minded, to have our hearts turned to Jesus through joyful repentance, let us be those who are also open to the consuming fire from heaven falling on us and consuming all of our sins and turning our hearts to God through Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit. May we be those who draw closer to Jesus, see our sin, repent, confess our sin, receive the consuming fire of Holy Spirit, and then feast with one another and Jesus at his table. Today, we are invited to come to the altar as a table that holds for us the remembrance of Jesus’ body given for us and his blood shed for us that we might be reconciled to God. Today, we are all invited to come to Jesus’ table and feast with him, to commune with him and to remember all he has done, is doing, and will do for us. Let us prepare our hearts by turning them to Jesus and confessing our sin, and then let us receive the consuming fire of Holy Spirit and feast with one another and Jesus at his table. Let us continue to reclaim the altar in this place as a place where we come into the presence of God through Jesus Christ in the power of Holy Spirit.

Pray with me: Father, let it be known this day that you are Adonia, and we are your servants. Jesus, may all we do be at your bidding and may our hearts and the hearts of your people in the community we serve be turned back to you. Holy Spirit, come, consume the sin that yet clings, and purify us that we might offer sacrifices in righteousness to Adonai. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the
oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The LORD, Adonia, is God; the
LORD, Adonia, is God. Let us turn our hearts again to the one true God
and then go forth to labor in His ripe harvest. Amen.

ⁱ NRSV 1 Kings 18:21

ⁱⁱ NRSV 1 Kings 18:29