

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JUNE 19, 2022

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**TWELFTH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

One: Choose this day whom you will serve.  
**All: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.**  
One: Cry aloud, and call upon God's name.  
**All: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.**  
One: Declare God's glory among the nations.  
**All: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.**  
One: Sing to the Lord, and bless God's name.  
**All: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** "O God Beyond All Praising" StF 2009

**1. O God beyond all praising, we worship you today  
and sing the love amazing that songs cannot repay;  
for we can only wonder at every gift you send,  
at blessings without number and mercies without end:  
We lift our hearts before you and wait upon your Word,  
we honor and adore you, our great and mighty Lord.**

**2. Then hear, O gracious Savior, accept the love we bring,  
that we who know your favor may serve you as our king;  
and whether our tomorrows be filled with good or ill,  
we'll triumph through our sorrows and rise to bless you still:  
To marvel at your beauty and glory in your ways,  
and make a joyful duty our sacrifice of praise.**

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**\*UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**O Lord our God, we confess to you  
our unfaithfulness,  
our divided loyalties,  
our dancing around the truth.  
We look for human approval  
instead of seeking to serve you.  
We answer to human authority  
instead of listening for your Word.  
Turn our hearts back to you.  
Consume our sin with holy fire  
and set us free to sing your praise. Amen.**

**\*SILENT CONFESSION**

**\*ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: This is the gospel,  
the good news we have received:  
**All: that our Lord Jesus Christ loves us  
and gave his life  
to set us free from our sins.**  
One: Hear the good news!  
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.  
**All: Thanks be to God.**

**\*THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.  
**All: And also with you.**

*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)*

**THE WORD**

**SCRIPTURE READING I Kings 18:1-2,17-40**

**I KINGS 18:1-2, 17-40** (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>1</sup> *After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year of the drought, saying, "Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain on the earth."* <sup>2</sup> *So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. The famine was severe in Samaria. ...*

<sup>17</sup> *When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"* <sup>18</sup> *He answered, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals."* <sup>19</sup> *Now*

*therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."*

<sup>20</sup> *So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel.*  
<sup>21</sup> *Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow the Lord; but if Baal, then follow Baal." The people did not answer him a word.* <sup>22</sup> *Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty.*  
<sup>23</sup> *Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it.* <sup>24</sup> *Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." All the people answered, "Well spoken!"* <sup>25</sup> *Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it."* <sup>26</sup> *So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made.* <sup>27</sup> *At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."* <sup>28</sup> *Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them.* <sup>29</sup> *As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.*

<sup>30</sup> *Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me"; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down;* <sup>31</sup> *Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name";* <sup>32</sup> *with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed.* <sup>33</sup> *Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood."* <sup>34</sup> *Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time,* <sup>35</sup> *so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.*

<sup>36</sup> *At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O Lord, 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.* <sup>37</sup> *Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back."* <sup>38</sup> *Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.* <sup>39</sup> *When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."* <sup>40</sup> *Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.*

## **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

## SERMON

“The Danger of Idolatry (in both directions)...and the Invitation”

by Pastor Bill Vincent

This is a bloody story.

And I’m not simply talking about killing the bulls for the sacrifice – bloody enough by itself.

Nor, for that matter, am I talking about the ritual of the Baal prophets when they cut themselves – maybe intended as a mark of their devotion?

This is a bloody story. For “*Elijah...killed them there*” – all 450 prophets of Baal.

This is one of those passages that tends to make most Christians squirm, not only because of the picture it paints, but also because of the purpose for which it can be used.

This passage has been used too often to justify *jihad* – holy war: “Rid the world of the idolaters, the infidels, the heathens!”

Now, we may want to think such use is only the shame of Muslim extremists. But let us not think too highly of ourselves.

Let us not forget the part the church itself has played in seeking to rid the world of idolaters, persecuting heathens and torturing infidels into so-called conversions.

It’s a bloody passage. And it still is.

But it must not be used to justify the horror of any ‘holy war’. But neither am I certain that we can minimize the horror that the passage and the story itself holds.

We must read this story in context, and not in isolation.

And the context of this story is broader than simply these 26 verses.

For we read this story and learn its lesson in the broader context of God’s work and will in Jesus Christ. And reading this passage through that lens means we can in no way condone violence against those who do not hold to our understanding of faith and God.

The witness of Jesus Christ – in his life and his ministry; in his crucifixion and his call for us to take up our own cross; in his admonition to love your neighbor as yourself and even to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44) – clearly contradicts any attempt to use this story to justify violence against those who believe differently than us, however narrowly or broadly that difference is defined.

Maybe we are truly missing the point if all we take away from this passage is the violence of blood and guts and gore.

This passage, this story is central to the work and ministry and reputation of Elijah, considered one of the greatest of the prophets.

Surely there is something of value to be taken from this story. (Hint: it’s more than just ‘something’.)

Maybe a better take on the story is this:

To begin with, let us not overlook the obvious: that God takes idolatry seriously. Some of the first words Elijah speaks to Ahab:

*“You have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.”*

Identifying the underlying problem.

God takes idolatry seriously. Which means God takes our worship seriously and God takes our loyalty seriously and God takes our faithfulness (or lack thereof) seriously.

There’s good reason that the first of the Ten Commandments is *“You shall have no other gods before me”* (Exodus 20). NO other gods.

God expects absolute loyalty. No “limping” allowed, as the people are accused. Jesus himself said, *“You cannot serve two masters, for you will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other”* (Matthew 6:24).

It’s hard to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”* and leave room for anything, or anyone, else as ‘god’ in your life.

And yet, we try.

But when we put anything before the Lord – money, possessions, job, family, nation – and allow it or them to claim our adoration, our time, our energy, our resources, our hearts; then we bow before an idol that is not God.

God sent prophets time and time again – even with doom and gloom on their lips, and the threat of punishment – all with the same message: “Return to me, says the Lord – me as your one true God.”

God takes idolatry seriously.

And maybe the reason is that God knows that idolatry is deadly. Idolatry is not simply ‘no big deal’.

We ended last week by affirming that God is **“on the side of life”** (Richard D. Nelson, Interpretation series, p.113).

By contrast, anything other than the Lord as our god, or anything else that serves as our sole loyalty or our center of value, is on the side of death. To follow anyone other than the Lord is to be led – ultimately – toward death.

Idolatry is deadly.

And not only for oneself, but also for others.

One of the confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the Barmen Declaration. Written in the 1930’s, it was a statement written by the Confessional Synod to the German Evangelical Church warning of the danger of giving up ultimate authority to the state: the idolatry of nationalism. But the idolatry won out, which led to the death of so many: not only those who held to the idolatry of Nazi nationalism, but also to far too many innocents caught in the maelstrom of Aryanism and the Nazi party line.

For anything other than the one true God leads us down a path that can only end in destruction and death.

Of course, let me be clear: that does not mean that we hold a monopoly on understanding the one true God. To believe that we do is itself a form of idolatry – the idolatry of self.

And idolatry is deadly. Following the wrong lead, the wrong guidance, giving ourselves to the wrong purpose and will, is deadly.

Which, yes, raises the question: How do I know I'm following the right lead, the right guidance, giving myself to the right purpose and will? Now that's a difficult question, sticky at best. For we continue throughout our life to learn and grow in our understanding.

But part of the answer, it seems to me, may be this: if following the wrong god is deadly, and therefore following the right God is lively and life-giving, then the lead and guidance and purpose and will that gives life is headed in the right direction.

As Jesus himself said, "*I have come that they might have life and have it abundant*" (John 10:10).

Idolatry is deadly – dangerous, yes.

And not only dangerous in my following the wrong path.

But also dangerous when I think *I* am the arbiter and the executer (literally) of the judgment on idolatry: when I believe it is *my* place to 'enforce' (emphasis on 'force') the ban on idolatry. For doing that all too often leads to the 'slaughter of the prophets' of the god I don't choose or like, and it serves as the idolatry of *my* faith, of *my* interpretation, of *my* perspective.

But instead of focusing on the slaughter of the prophets of Baal as the takeaway from this story against idolatry, perhaps it would be better for us to focus on what Elijah did before then, not only to focus attention on the true God, but also to direct the people's efforts toward the true God.

1. Elijah invited the people to come near (v.30). Even before then, at the very start when they gathered at Mt. Carmel, "*Elijah came near the people.*"

It is easy to demonize and dehumanize (and demean) someone with whom we disagree when we keep them at arm's length. It is not so easy when we "come near" to them: when we engage them, when we relate to them.

Our proximity to those who may follow another god (whether acknowledged or not) makes a difference; not only to them, but also to us, for in our conversation and dialogue, comparing and contrasting our beliefs with theirs helps sharpen and focus our understanding and faith.

2. Elijah was intentional about worship.

He rebuilt the altar.

He used the symbolism of the 12 stones – the 12 tribes – that spoke to the people.

He recalled the history of God with the people: bringing that to mind to bring back to mind the God who delivered them and loved them...and expected them to love the Lord in return.

If we are to worship God alone, Elijah sought to do just that.

3. And Elijah did what he believed needed to be done to give space and opportunity for God to act and for God to prove Godself.

Not to manipulate God or test God (not our place).

But it begs the question: what will we do? how we will live? what choices will we make? what words will we speak? that will make space in our lives and give God the opportunity to act

in us and work with us and move through us and be present in life so God can prove Godself and demonstrate God's power and manifest God's grace.

You see, Elijah invited the people and built the altar and provided the sacrifice. But God provided the fire. God lit the flame. God consumed the offering.

In the end, God defended God's name and God's reputation and God's rightful place as the one and only true God.

Will we make space in our lives for God to do the same in us?

The opposite of idolatry is fidelity.

And indeed the best opposition to idolatry is fidelity.

And so the invitation of idolatry (as I have termed it) is the invitation to a life of fidelity: the invitation to follow and join with the one God who created life, who gives life, who knows and leads us in the way of life.

You know, I wonder: as Elijah stood on Mt. Carmel and watched the people arriving, was he remembering another time when the people had gathered? When the people had entered the promised land and settled in their respective areas, and Joshua had gathered the people together at Shechem. And after Joshua had laid the situation before them, he said,

*"Choose this day whom you will serve ... As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."* (Joshua 24:15)

Choose this day.

It need not be a bloody choice.

But it does need to be a clear one.

**\*HYMN "Come Down, O Love Divine" GtG 282**

**1. Come down, O Love Divine;  
seek out this soul of mine,  
and visit it with your own ardor glowing.  
O Comforter, draw near;  
within my heart appear,  
and kindle it, your holy flame bestowing.**

**2. O let it freely burn,  
till earthly passions turn  
to dust and ashes in its heat consuming.  
And let your glorious light  
shine ever on my sight,  
and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.**

3. And so the yearning strong,  
with which the soul will long,  
shall far outpass the power of human telling.  
For none can guess God's grace,  
till Love creates a place  
wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.

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**\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.  
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,  
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,  
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,  
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.  
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,  
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

*(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)*

**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

**Pastor:           Come, Lord...**  
**People:           ...claim us in your mercy.**

**THE LORD'S PRAYER** *(Contemporary)*

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.**



**Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
    as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
    and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
    and the glory are yours  
    now and forever. Amen.**

## **OFFERING**

*Invitation*

*Reflection*

*\*Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Lord of all we have and all we are,  
    there is no one like you  
    in heaven above or on the earth below.  
You are faithful to your promises,  
    showing steadfast love to your people.  
Receive our offerings  
    as a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise.  
Let our lives bless others  
    that they too may know  
    that you are Lord of all they have and all they are;.  
Let our gifts show forth to all the world  
    the glory of your holy name. Amen.**

## **SENDING**

**\*CLOSING HYMN** “Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart” GtG 688 (*Verses 1, 3, & 5*)

- 1. Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;  
    wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;  
    stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art,  
    and make me love thee as I ought to love.**
- 3. Hast thou not bid us love thee, God and King;  
    all, all thine own, soul, heart, and strength, and mind?  
    I see thy cross; there teach my heart to cling.  
    O let me seek thee, and O let me find!**

5. **Teach me to love thee as thine angels love,  
one holy passion filling all my frame;  
the baptism of the heaven-descended Dove,  
my heart an altar, and thy love the flame.**

*(Public Domain)*

**\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

**Pastor:** ...And let the gathered people of God say...

**People:** ...Amen.

**POSTLUDE**

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