

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Colloquy with Elijah
1 Kings 18:16-39
May 29, 2016

If you know my family at all, you might have guessed that Elijah is one of those prophets in the bible that have always captured my imagination. The bible, of course, is full of these beautiful, gut wrenching, sometimes horrifying, sometimes heart warming stories of people who have struggled to know God... to make some sense of who God is... and what it means to follow God in this messy world in which we live.

And ***all*** of those stories can have a way of working on us, and working in us. But for most of us, there are a handful that really grab ahold of our sacred imagination... for one reason or another.

This story of Elijah up on Mt. Carmel has always been one of those stories for me. Truth be told, I can't always say exactly why that is, but something in this story grips me in a unique kind of way... and won't let me go. It works on me in new ways each time I come back to it.

This morning we're going to do something a little unusual for us, because I want to invite you to let this story work on you too. We're going to engage in an ancient practice that became part of the Ignatius way of prayer called a **colloquy**. I'll explain what that means in just a moment. But before we do, let me open up this story for you just a bit.

This whole scene takes place generations after King David and his son Solomon. Israel has been ruled by a series of Kings now, and most recently by King Ahab. Unlike David, Ahab was not a **“man after God's own heart.”** In fact, it was quite the opposite. Ahab, was a king **“Contrary to God's own heart.”** In fact, the scriptures say that he did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any king before him... and if you'd read all the stories of the kings before him, you'd know, that's really saying something!

But you know, he did marry Jezebel... which was probably enough by itself to put him in that category. She's pretty scary. But that wasn't it. Not really.

The one thing the scriptures emphasize again and again is that Ahab encouraged the worship of the Canaanite God, Baal. He built a temple and an altar to Baal. And he would have preferred to see the people of Israel forget about Yahweh... to forget about the Lord all together.

Now, to be fair to Ahab, there were some good practical reasons for that. For one thing, Baal was Jezebel's favorite god, and Ahab was a smart man. He knew who was really running things at home. I imagine he'd rather take on all the prophets of the Lord than take on his wife!

But it was more than that really. Yahweh was such an old school, outdated god. Yes, Yahweh, the LORD, had delivered their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt.

Yes, Yahweh brought them to the Promised Land.

Yes, Yahweh was a helpful God if you were a nomad like Abraham,
or slaves like the Hebrews in Egypt,
or wilderness wonderers looking for a home like Moses...

But they were a different people now. And new times means there are new needs. They've been settled in the land for generations. And now they are farmers... rather than nomads. And more than anything, they need their crops to grow. And well... ***Baal, was the god of fertility.***

It's not that the people were outright rejecting, Yahweh, the Lord. But... it just made sense to worship Baal too... or eventually more.

A god of fertility would give them a bountiful harvest...

Baal was the storm god, which was pretty important in their arid landscape. For the people of that time, ***a god of fertility was a god of economic security.***

Yes, worshiping the Lord, worshiping Yahweh was good and all... but Yahweh wasn't going to help their kids get a scholarship. Yahweh wasn't the one watching over the stock market, or giving them a strategy for a strong 401K.

Yahweh...the God of their ancestors,
the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the god of Moses...
the god that told them to care for their neighbor,
to take care of the foreigner and the oppressed... because they too were once
foreigners and slaves.

The God that commanded they not covet their neighbor's possessions...

The God that told them to keep the Sabbath...

was just not as practical these days.

So, you see... worshiping Baal... it just kind of made sense. And it was good economic policy for Ahab's Kingdom. And so, that's what Ahab encouraged.

But, then along comes Elijah... who still believes the ancient stories... and who remembers that Yahweh had not only made a covenant with Israel to be their God, but also told them to have no other gods... and Elijah knows that Yahweh is not just God of Abraham, Israel, Jacob. This is the creator God of all that is – of earth, sea and sky. The God who breathes life into the dust of our bodies.

And so, Elijah tells Ahab, that by the word of the Lord, the word of Yahweh, the Creator God, of heaven and earth, there will be no more rain... ***“Let's see just how much your “god” Baal, the storm god, the god of fertility, does for you now.”***

And guess what. It didn't rain.

For three years a drought strikes the land... and all during that time Elijah is nowhere to be found. Ahab has people looking for him everywhere... but he's disappeared.

Then one day, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah again and tells him, "Go, tell Ahab, that I, the Lord, I, Yahweh, will send the rain again."

Elijah shows back up and that's where our story begins today. Ahab sees him and says, **"There's that trouble maker."**

But Elijah turns the table on him and says, **"I'm not the trouble maker here. You... and your worship of Baal have caused this drought."**

You see, this moment on Mt. Carmel is a culmination moment. It's the culmination of a growing tension, a growing struggle between two different ways of seeing the world... between two different allegiances.

It's not just about who is right and who is wrong. It's about the heart of the people, trusting in the one true God, the maker of heaven and earth, of sea and sky...

Or of trusting and giving their lives to Baal... to an economic system, to a world view where worship equals success, to the god of fertility where personal security and survival is your deepest value.

Here at Mt. Carmel, in this moment, the hearts and minds of the people are at stake. And so, Elijah challenges the people. **"How long will you hobble back and forth. If the Lord is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal."**

And they are silent.

They don't know what to say.

And so he proposes this contest. Two alters, one to the Lord and one to Baal, to see who shows up. The people watch all day... and the prophets of Baal cry out, but Baal never shows up. He's as absent as he has been these last three years of drought.

That night, it's Elijah's turn. He has them soak the alter of the Lord in water. And then... he prays... and prays.

"Lord, let it be known that you are god, and I am your servant"

.... silence...

"Lord, Answer me!"

...silence...

"Answer me so that this people will know that you, Lord, and the real God and that you can change hearts."

And then the fire from heaven falls and consumes the alter.

Now, in order to enter this story, I'm going to invite you to do something that will feel strange to most of us. I want to ask you to have a conversation with Elijah. That's what a colloquy is... It's the practice of a Holy Conversation.

As I said earlier, this is a regular part of the way that St. Ignatius taught people to pray, and many people still use this practice today. And this is how Ignatius describes it: ***"The colloquy is made, properly speaking, as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master..."***

So, imagine that you're able to sit down with Elijah and talk. Maybe you're at a coffee shop or in your living room. Maybe you're outside, sitting on some sacred rock in the wilderness and off in the distance you can see Mt. Carmel.

What might you ask him about?

What would you want to know?

What would you tell him about yourself?

What would he tell you?

What would Elijah be asking you?

I want to ask you to take that insert that was in your worship guide, and being to write out the conversation you might have with Elijah.

Now, I already know what some of you are thinking, because it's what I was thinking when someone taught me this practice recently. **"This is weird. I have no idea what Elijah would say." Or maybe, "I don't want to make up a pretend conversation, Chris"**

I get that. But, I'm going to ask you to do it anyway.

Let go of your cynicism.

Let go of your inhibitions for the next 10 minutes

and simply give it a try.

No one is going to see this paper but you. We're not going to collect them. This is for you. So just let go and try. See where it takes you. That's all I'm asking.

Whatever you do, be real.

Be honest.

Like in any meaningful conversation, it's OK to leave time for silence or for listening. You have plenty of time here. We'll take about 10 minutes. After about 10 minutes you'll hear Marsha begin to sing "Trust in the Lord." That will be your cue to draw your conversation to a close.

If you want to spread out some, you can.

Or you can stay right where you are.

But go ahead; take your paper and pen. Get comfortable.

Take a deep breath. And whenever you're ready, begin.