

3/8/26

The Mountain of Power *1 Kings 18:16-39 (NIV)*
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Our sermon text for this morning comes from *1 Kings 18:16-39*. With open ears and open hearts, hear now the Word of the Lord.

“So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, ‘Is that you, you troubler of Israel?’ ‘I have not made trouble for Israel,’ Elijah replied. ‘But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.’ So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, ‘How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.’ But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, ‘I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. 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—he is God.’ Then all the people said, ‘What you say is good.’

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, ‘Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.’ So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. ‘Baal, answer us!’ they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. ‘Shout louder!’ he said. ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.’ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come here to me.’ They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, ‘Your name shall be Israel.’ With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, ‘Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.’ ‘Do it again,’ he said, and they did it again. ‘Do it a third time,’ he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: ‘Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.’ Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, ‘The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!’” (*1 Kings 18:16-39*).

We give thanks for God’s Word, by which our path in life is illuminated. “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

On February 22, 1980, at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, NY, in a matchup of biblical proportions comparable to David versus Goliath, the United States men’s hockey team faced the heavily favored Soviet Union (USSR) men’s hockey team. The match has come to be known by its name in sports lore, the “Miracle on Ice”, and the US men would go on, after winning that matchup, to win a gold medal. Nearly 46 years later to the day, on February 20 of this year, just last month, the US men’s hockey team found themselves in pursuit of another gold medal, this time squaring off against a championship-caliber Canadian team. Would history repeat itself these Olympics, and see another US men’s hockey gold medal – the first in nearly half a century? To know how the story goes is to know about tenacity, hard work, and discipline paying off in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Now, you may be familiar with the Miracle on Ice, but have you ever heard of the “Miracle on the Mat”?

You may not know this about me, but wrestling is one of my favorite sports – whether high school, collegiate, or at the world level. One of the great wrestling matches of all time came between Rulon Gardner, at that time a virtual unknown farmer from Wyoming, when he faced Aleksander Karelin, “the Russian bear”, that country’s heavily favored heavyweight, Greco-Roman wrestler. Karelin’s physical prowess was such that he became his country’s national flag bearer at three consecutive Olympic games: in 1988, 1992, and 1996. He had won three consecutive Olympic gold medals, and went undefeated in international competition for thirteen years. Nicknamed “Alexander the Great”, his opponents had come to accept that they stood little chance in the face of his herculean might and stature, let alone the considerable weight of his accomplishments.

His opponent was an American farmer from rural Afton, Wyoming, population 2,172 as of the latest census. As Gardner took his stance across from Russian bear, you began to get a firsthand glimpse of that matchup between David and Goliath. Could Gardner survive six minutes in the ring with Karelin? Asked about his prospects for victory, Gardner had expressed confidence in his own abilities and knew he could go toe-to-toe with Karelin, and Karelin knew he was the best in the world at his level in his sport. At the conclusion of their match in the finals, one of the wrestlers left his shoes in the ring at the center of the mat, a sign of retirement once a wrestler has concluded career competition. It’s like hanging up the towel. Which wrestler would emerge victorious from this unlikely matchup? More on that to come.

All this talk of victory in the face of overwhelming odds reminds me of the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel. Nestled between *1 Kings 17* and *19*, chapter *18* tells the story of a lone prophet of Yahweh as he faces off against some 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah, all of whom are vying for the hearts and souls of God’s people in Israel. It’s a titanic matchup, and the odds are stacked up 450 to one, at best. It looks like Elijah is outmatched, outpowered, outmaneuvered – broken down altar of the Lord, no company of prophets with whom to call on the Lord, and disfavor in the eyes of the ruling elite, Elijah puts his faith on the line when he calls out the prophets of Baal to a contest on Mt. Carmel.

Nevertheless, when Elijah and the people meet up on the mountain, it's *their* odds he calls into question, not his own. In the *New Revised Standard Version*, we read in verses 21 and 26 of *chapter 18*: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ The people did not answer him a word” (1 Kings 18:21 NRSV). “They limped about the altar that they had made” (1 Kings 18:26b). That’s a lot of limping. It almost reminds me of the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel in *Genesis 32*. He came away from that match with a limp when his hip was displaced, and he even emerged with a new name that would describe an entire nation, a name that meant “one who strives or contends with God”.

When we encounter the power of the living God, we may come away either dancing or ducking for cover, limping or leaping for joy.

Christian writer Frederick Beuchner describes the epic scene on Mount Carmel in this way. First published in *Peculiar Treasures* and then later in *Beyond Words*:

“In the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal to see whose God was the real article, Elijah won the first round hands down. Starting out early in the morning on Mt. Carmel, the prophets of Baal pulled out all the stops to get their candidate to set fire to the sacrificial offering. They danced around the altar till their feet were sore. They made themselves hoarse shouting instructions and encouragement at the sky. They jabbed at themselves with knives thinking that the sight of blood would start things moving if anything would, but they might as well have saved themselves the trouble.

Although it was like beating a dead horse, Elijah couldn't resist getting in a few digs. ‘Maybe Baal's flown to Bermuda for the weekend,’ he said. ‘Maybe he's taking a nap.’ The prophets whipped themselves into greater and greater frenzies under his goading, but by mid-afternoon the sacrificial offering had begun to get a little high, and there was still no sign of fire from above. Then it was Elijah's turn to show what Yahweh could do.

He was like a magician getting ready to pull a rabbit out of a hat. First he had a trench dug around the altar and filled with water. Then he got a bucket brigade going to give the offering a good dowsing too. Then as soon as they'd finished, he got them to do it again for good measure. By the time they'd finished a third go-round, the whole place was awash, and Elijah looked as if he'd just finished

swimming the channel. He then gave Yahweh the word to show his stuff and jumped back just in time.

Lightning flashed. The water in the trench fizzed like spit on a hot stove. Nothing was left of the offering but a pile of ashes and a smell like the Fourth of July. The onlookers were beside themselves with enthusiasm and at a signal from Elijah demolished the losing team down to the last prophet. Nobody could say whose victory had been greater, Yahweh's or Elijah's.

But the sequel to the event seems to have made this clear. Queen Jezebel (see AHAB) was determined to get even with Elijah for what he had done to her spiritual advisers, and to save his skin he went and hid out on Mt. Horeb. Again he gave Yahweh the word, not because he wanted anything set on fire this time but just to keep his hand in.

Again the lightning flashed, and after that a wind came up that almost blew Elijah off his feet, and after that the earth gave such a shake that it almost knocked him silly. But there wasn't so much as a peep out of Yahweh, and Elijah stood there like a ringmaster when the lion won't jump through the hoop.

Only when the fireworks were finished and a terrible hush fell over the mountain did Elijah hear something, and what he heard was so much like silence that it was only through the ear of faith that he knew it was Yahweh. Nonetheless, the message came through loud and clear: that there was no longer any question who had been the star at Mt. Carmel and that not even Elijah could make the Lord God of Hosts jump through a hoop like a lion or pop out like a rabbit from a hat.”

Beuchner puts into clear terms for us what is at stake on Mt. Carmel: God's reputation is on the line, and Elijah is his designated spokesperson. Elijah had the wherewithal to listen using the “ear of faith” beyond his own scary circumstances to hear the creator of the universe drawing near. If this were a debate match, it would seem the prophets of Baal came unprepared; if were a battle of wits, they were sorely unarmed.

Why does Elijah have such success on the mountaintop? Is it because of his own might or power? Is it the size of his faith, or his track record of generous, sacrificial giving? Is it his resume or his zeal for the Lord of Hosts?

Elijah is successful on the mountain of power for precisely the same reason he has been successful throughout his prophetic ministry, and the reason is simple: he is willing to listen to God.

Elijah prepares himself and the circumstances of his life to reveal God's power. He takes a broken-down altar and makes it stand at attention. He takes a people who are on the fence, limping between two opinions and allegiance to two competing religious systems, and leaves them with no doubt whose God is the greatest. He even takes his own legitimate fears and sacrifices them on the altar of full obedience to God. Elijah is someone from whom we can learn a few things!

In fact, I believe we can learn much from the cast of characters in the account on Mt. Carmel. We have royalty, the people, the Lord, and prophet Elijah. Each of them on Mt. Carmel, in turn, teaches us something about power.

Why did prophet Elijah choose Mt. Carmel for this climactic confrontation? That's an excellent question! As the astute Holy Land pilgrim knows, perhaps for several reasons. Shelby shared with me after her visit to Israel:

- The formidable Mt. Carmel, a notable geographic icon in the northern kingdom of Israel, was a half day's walk for the people of Israel.
- The winter palace of King Ahab, located in Megiddo, was visible from this location.
- The stronghold of the prophets of Baal, nearby in the village of Neb, was visible from Mt. Carmel.

This was a central stage visible for all around, an unmistakable viewpoint into the daily lives and lived realities of God's people.

The royalty: Ahab and Jezebel have imported her national religion into Israel. They streamline the political process and have the upper hand in virtually every way. They take justice, and even freedom of religious expression, into their own hands, labeling Elijah a troubler of Israel because he refuses to give in to progress and move on from the worship of Almighty God. Their power rests in their royal positions, and if we read the rest of the story, it doesn't last long. They use their power to enrich themselves, and as a result, all is lost.

The people: Israel shows up in force on Mt. Carmel. They come ready to see a spectacle, and perhaps the greatest spectacle of all is that they turn from their idolatry to

worship the living God. By their combined efforts, they all but wipe out Baal worship in the land. When the people unite and rise up in faith, they are capable of great things. They use their power to reclaim their historic faith, and deliverance comes in an unexpected way, as a result.

The Lord: God's power is on full display on Mount Carmel. Just when it feels like the situation is impossible, once again, God shows up in a big way. Even with water in scarce supply, Elijah has the audacity to instruct the people to douse the newly restored altar with one, two, three bath-fulls of water. No problem for God, and neither is the multi-year drought, which will soon come to an end. Just as the people's faith is restored and they return to God, so the rains return to their land. Fields are replanted. Crops start growing again. Opportunity arrives on the scene. God's mighty power provides for hearts, minds, souls, even thirsty bodies and hungry stomachs. Hope is reborn.

Then comes prophet Elijah. A relatively powerless prophet, overwhelmed by odds and obstacles, counted out by royalty, shows up and stands his ground. Not once, but many times, Elijah discovers God's power in unexpected, unanticipated ways:

- By a brook named Cherith, where he is fed by ravens,
- At the home of a widow, where starvation seems inevitable,
- In an upper room, after a boy passes away unexpectedly,
- On the mountain, where it seems sure he will see judgment and imprisonment,
- In the wilderness, when he is on the run,
- On the mountain of the Lord, in the midst of cataclysmic events.

Friends, I believe we are in need of a prophetic word from prophet Elijah.

Where do you see the impossible in your life? Where are you running low on funds, on food, on essentials, on hope? Where do you need God to show up and provide in a big way?

The first thing that Elijah and the Mountain of God's Power reminds us is that, time and again, God's power is available to us right where we are, on the mountain or in the valley. Whether we are being fed by ravens next to a brook, camping out under the stars, taking our daily bread with widows and children, or eating the bread of heaven, God's power is as available to us as it was to prophet Elijah.

The second important truth we learn when we pay attention to his life is that, just as Elijah prepares the altar, setting up the stones, preparing the sacrifice, and calling on

God to act, we need to prepare ourselves to notice God's power at work. We can place the stones of our lives in order as reminders to others of God's power and provision and as a witness to God's faithfulness. When we set up our Ebenezer, our stone of help, as a way-marker for others, we have no idea the lives we may touch or the hope we may inspire. When we build our life on Jesus, the chief cornerstone, rivers of living water well up from within us, and the fire of God's Spirit warms and illuminates, dispelling doubt and darkness.

If we **don't** take time to slow down, listen, and obey, we may miss the work God has for us.

Last, but not least, we can learn from prophet Elijah that success in the face of overwhelming odds is possible when we submit our skills and abilities for God's use. The power of royalty comes to an end. The power of the people waxes and wanes, unless it is rooted and anchored in honoring God by loving God and loving others. Even prophets come to doubt that they matter, lamenting their existence. But God. But God gives us the hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ. But God gives us victory when our hearts are wondering. But God's power sustains prophets and people, princes and princesses, granting victory in any circumstances.

Elijah's faith was formed in the fire of his circumstances, and his legacy endures because he put his trust in God's power, on the mountain, in the valley, and every in between.

Maybe that's a lesson that Rulon Gardner learned at the 2000 summer Olympics, when he bested the great "Russian bear" in the Miracle on the Mat.

Maybe that's a daring hope the US men's hockey team clung to when they beat the Canadian Olympic hockey team last month, nearly 46 years to the day after the Miracle on Ice.

Maybe that fueled the US women's hockey team to a gold medal victory in these winter Olympics. When they trusted in one another, worked together, prepared for victory and disciplined themselves to pursue victory, anything was possible.

After all, the lesson of Elijah's miracle on the mountain of power and the mountain of God isn't really about Elijah at all; it's about a God who loves us, who powerfully provides for our needs, and who is with us when the whole world is shifting around us.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Elijah took twelve stones, which stood for the twelve tribes of Israel, and rebuilt them on Mt. Carmel. How do you take time to prepare yourself to see God at work in the details of your life?
2. We see God show up in different ways through different stories. What can we learn from Ahab and Jezebel, the people of Israel, and prophet Elijah, about God's power at work in their lives and in our own?
3. Think about the places where Elijah's journey has taken him: into a foreign land, into a deserted place near a water brook, into confrontation with the ruling powers and the elite. What tools gave Elijah the ability to navigate these different seasons and circumstances so well?
4. Which mountain moment do you think stood out more for prophet Elijah: his time with the assembly of Israel on Mt. Carmel, or his time with God on Mt. Horeb, and why? Is it easier to hear God's voice in the busy, sensational, activity-filled moments of our lives, or in moments of quiet repose and retreat?
5. Read *1 Kings 18:46 (NIV)*. One of the often-overlooked portions of Elijah's narrative comes at the end of *1 Kings 18* – his run from the top of Mt. Carmel to Jezreel, the summer royal residence. This was a distance of up to 25 miles, depending on the route taken, and Elijah ran ahead of Ahab's chariot all the way. In the contest of running man versus king's horses, Elijah wins! What insight does the text give us about the source of Elijah's supernatural vim and vigor? Say more about how you think he was able to accomplish this amazing feat.
6. Take a moment to think about and describe the moment of life in which you find yourself. In what ways do you need God's power of provision in your life, and in what ways are you seeing God already at work in the details of your life?