

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 6, Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters:
2017 Summer Series

“What Kind of Faith Am I Living?”

1 Kings 18:1-40 (July 22 & 23, 2017)

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Let's Pray: God of wonders, You move around us. You move in our lives. We pray for your movement here and now so we may encounter you. May we hear what you have to say to us this morning, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations on each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. You are our Rock. You are our Redeemer. Amen.

We often go to the New Testament, to the early Christian Church, to see what it looks like to live a faith that is passionate and alive and on fire. But today as we continue to explore Holy Visions and Divine Encounters in Scripture, we turn to an earlier time. We turn to a time 800 to 900 years before Jesus.

Let's take a glimpse at the faith of the prophet Elijah. Elijah had a faith that was active and passionate, a faith that was strong and alive. Let's contrast that with a stagnant and unchanging faith, a faith Scripture calls lukewarm.

It's King Ahab in this morning's Scripture, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. King Ahab could've been a great Israelite King, **BUT**, he lived and ruled with a lukewarm faith. His faith was a self-serving faith. He used his faith to bring himself convenience and comfort. Ahab wasn't afraid to compromise his values. Ahab wasn't afraid to sell out and to live a lukewarm life.

Our Scripture picks up with the passionate, prophetic voice of Elijah. Elijah was on fire for God, and truthfully, Elijah wasn't always thrilled about it. His vibrant faith got him into sticky situations. For example, in today's Scripture, Elijah, this man of God, called King Ahab to account for his lukewarm faith.

This morning's Scripture is a long one so I'll invite you to follow along with me in the Bible or on the screen. I'm reading from the New Living Translation today. See what you think about a faith that is passionate and alive, compared to a faith that is lukewarm.

I will invite you to consider, too, how and where is God speaking to you through this Scripture.

In the written sermon, the background stories or conflicts are in [brackets] or Boxes.
For example: [Our Scripture takes place 3 years into a very severe drought. It's actually a drought Elijah originally proclaimed to King Ahab].

A reading from 1 Kings Chapter 18, we begin with verse 1.

¹ Later on, in the third year of the drought, the Lord said to Elijah, "Go and present yourself to King Ahab. [Go... to this guy who hates you. Go... see this guy who wants you dead]. Tell him [the King] that I will soon send rain!" ² So Elijah went to appear before Ahab.

Elijah is living a faith that is alive and passionate.
Elijah is living a faith that informs and directs his life.
God called. Elijah went.

Meanwhile, the famine had become very severe in Samaria. ³ So Ahab summoned Obadiah, who was in charge of the palace. (Obadiah was a devoted follower of the Lord. [Obadiah wasn't lukewarm. Hear this:] ⁴ Once when [Queen] Jezebel had tried to kill all the Lord's prophets, Obadiah [risked his life and] had hidden 100 of them [the prophets] in two caves. He put fifty prophets in each cave and supplied them with food and water).

⁵ Ahab said to Obadiah, "We must check every spring and valley in the land to see if we can find enough grass to save at least some of my horses and mules." ⁶ So they divided the land between them. Ahab went one way by himself, and Obadiah went another way by himself. ⁷ As Obadiah was walking along, he suddenly saw Elijah coming toward him. Obadiah recognized him at once and bowed low to the ground before him. "Is it really you, my lord Elijah?" he asked. ⁸ "Yes, it is," Elijah replied. "Now go and tell your master, 'Elijah is here.' "

➤ Can you hear Obadiah's thoughts here?

Great. This is just great. Elijah shows up. The King **HATES** Elijah. Elijah shows up and right away, Elijah drags me into it.

➤ Can you hear Obadiah thinking something like:
I live my faith with fire and integrity, but come on. This isn't fair...

⁹ *"Oh, sir," Obadiah protested, "what harm have I done to you that you are sending me to my death at the hands of Ahab?"* ¹⁰ *For I swear by the Lord your God that the king has searched every nation and kingdom on earth from end to end to find you.* [Elijah, you're a wanted man, and now you want me, to tell the king, I know where Elijah is. Are you crazy? Don't drag me into this.] [Our Scripture continues...] *And each time he [King Ahab] was told 'Elijah isn't here,' [by other kings], King Ahab forced the king of that nation to swear to the truth of his claim.* [And Obadiah further protested...] ¹¹ *And now you say, 'Go and tell your master, "Elijah is here."'* ¹² *But as soon as I leave you, [you'll disappear and leave me hanging. As soon as I leave] the Spirit of the Lord will carry you away to who knows where. When Ahab comes and cannot find you, he will kill me. Yet I have been a true servant of the Lord all my life.* ¹³ *Has no one told you, my lord, about the time when Jezebel was trying to kill the Lord's prophets?* [I've been faithful, believe me. I've been faithful even when it's been hard.] *I hid 100 of them [the prophets] in two caves and supplied them with food and water [so Jezebel couldn't get them].* ¹⁴ *And now you say, 'Go and tell your master, "Elijah is here."' Sir, if I do that, Ahab will certainly kill me."*

Living a passionate faith doesn't guarantee life will be easy.

¹⁵ *But Elijah said, "I swear by the Lord Almighty, in whose presence I stand, that I will present myself to Ahab this very day."*
[I'm here and I'll see this through].

¹⁶ *So Obadiah went to tell Ahab that Elijah had come, and Ahab went out to meet Elijah.* ¹⁷ *When Ahab saw him, he exclaimed, "So, is it really you, you troublemaker of Israel?"*

Being faithful doesn't promise comfort. It can even get you branded as a troublemaker.

[Yet Elijah protests...] ¹⁸ *"I have made no trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "You and your family [...You're the lukewarm ones. You] are the troublemakers, for you have refused to obey the commands of the Lord and have worshiped the images of Baal instead.* [Ahab, you brought this on yourself. You worship God, and then Baal, and then the goddess of the Asherah poles. You won't even commit to what you believe. You try to play it any way that serves YOU. You want your faith to be comfortable and self-serving].

This is a challenging Scripture, isn't it?

[Elijah continues...] ¹⁹ *Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who are supported by Jezebel."*

²⁰ *So Ahab summoned all the people of Israel and the prophets to Mount Carmel.* ²¹ *Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, [People!] "How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? [How much longer will you be lukewarm?] If the Lord is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!" But the people were completely silent.*

But the people were completely silent. They wouldn't commit.
I don't know about you, but I think that's a confronting verse.

How much longer will you waiver. If the Lord is God, follow Him.
If your god is a false god, so be it.
And THE PEOPLE WERE COMPLETELY SILENT...

²² *Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only prophet of the Lord who is left, [...you've killed them all for Goodness sake,] but Baal has 450 prophets.* [Notice that the other 400 prophets of Asherah from v.19, they seem to have fled... So, it's 450 to 1.]

Elijah is the lone voice in the crowd... Ever feel like that yourself?

[Elijah continued...] ²³ *Now bring two bulls. The prophets of Baal may choose whichever one they wish and cut it into pieces and lay it on the wood of their altar, but without setting fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood on the altar, but not set fire to it.*

24 Then call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!" And all the people agreed.

It was what Mark Batterson might refer to as a prayer fleece of sorts. Elijah put it right out there. Here's the choice. We'll let God decide.

This wasn't about selfish desires or personal preferences.
This was about a passionate and living faith.
This was about trusting God, then obeying God.

25 Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "You go first, for there are many of you. Choose one of the bulls, and prepare it and call on the name of your god. But do not set fire to the wood."

26 So they prepared one of the bulls and placed it on the altar. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning until noontime, shouting, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced, hobbling around the altar they had made.

In many ways, chasing other gods made these prophets look foolish, didn't it? How often do we see that? Chasing other gods, making ourselves look foolish in the process?

In a couple weeks football will be starting again. How many of us can get lured into worshipping the false gods of football?

How many of us can get lured into chasing the false gods of a certain musician, or a piece of technology, or fishing or quilting or boating, or how many of us can get lured into the false god that there's only one right style of worship?

None of these things are bad things, unless we start worshipping them. None of these things are bad things, until we start prioritizing them over the one true God.

And We all have false gods tempting us, don't we?

[So, at this point it's not going well for the prophets of Baal...] ²⁷ *About noontime Elijah began mocking them. "You'll have to shout louder," he scoffed, "for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is daydreaming, or is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!"* [It's not the most gracious response from Elijah.]

²⁸ *So they [the prophets of Baal] shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out.*

They were making themselves look more and more foolish.
They were actually inflicting self-harm in the process.

Open the news and we see people crashing and burning chasing false gods. Investment bankers in jail, a prescribed drug getting sold under the counter and then abused, over extending credit, worshipping at the altar of the TV or golf or the internet or work. Our politics can become false gods...

[Our Scripture continues....] ²⁹ *They [the prophets of Baal] raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no sound, no reply, no response.*

³⁰ *Then Elijah called to the people, "Come over here!" They all crowded around him as he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been torn down. ³¹ He took twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel, ³² and he used the stones to rebuild the altar in the name of the Lord. Then he dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold about three gallons. ³³ He piled wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces, and laid the pieces on the wood.*

Then he [Elijah] said, "Fill four large jars with water, and pour the water over the offering and the wood."

Keep in mind this is a time of severe drought.
Water is a precious commodity.

*³⁴ After they had done this, he said, “Do the same thing again!”
And when they were finished, he said, “Now do it a third time!”
So, they did as he said, ³⁵ and the water ran around the altar and even
filled the trench. [Things are soaking wet.]*

*³⁶ At the usual time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet
walked up to the altar and prayed, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and
Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your
servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. ³⁷ O Lord,
answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O Lord, are
God and that you have brought them back to yourself.”*

Elijah’s faith is driving him forward. This is about God.
This isn’t about Elijah’s desires. It’s only about Elijah being

[The false prophets had been at it for some 6 hours, and
60 seconds into Elijah’s prayer...] *³⁸ Immediately the fire of the Lord flashed
down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones,
and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench!*

This wasn’t a lukewarm faith. This was a bold, vibrant faith.
There’s nothing comfortable about this scene.

*³⁹ And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and
cried out, “The Lord—he is God! Yes, the Lord is God!”*

This is a Holy Vision. This is a Divine Encounter.

When we allow and experience God's power and presence, it's life-changing. Hear how our Scripture today ends...

- ✚ Elijah wasn't hurling fire and brimstone at the people.
- ✚ Elijah wasn't rubbing salt in the wounds of the people because the reality is the people didn't know better.
- ✚ Elijah was there. He was in front of a generation of people who'd never been taught, a generation of people who until now had never truly experienced the power of God.
- ✚ He didn't need to rebuke or castigate them.
- ✚ He just wanted them to experience God like he knew God).

But the false prophets, that was a different story. They were intentionally leading people astray so Elijah made sure that didn't happen anymore.

Friends, this Scripture keeps going and going. There's nothing lukewarm about the way Elijah lives his faith. It makes a difference in his life AND it makes a difference in the lives of the people around him.

Matt Walsh writes about our battles against lukewarm faith. He writes:

If you find it easy to be a Christian, you may not be one.

He writes that over 80% of people in the US claim to be Christian, *80% of people in the US claim to be Christians*. And then he asks:

But how many, in the end, will stand before God and find out the hard way that their claim to be a Christian was false?

That's very strong language.

If we call ourselves Christians, at the end of the day, will God see it the same way?

Walsh writes: If we find our faith:

- *simple and easy to live... we better be careful.*
- *convenient and without cost... we better be careful.*
- *a nice feeling with no action... we better be careful.*
- *sterile and contained and without demands on our time, our resources, and our lives... we better be careful.*

We better be careful because that sounds lukewarm instead of passionate, active, and alive.

So here we are this morning... Here we are wrestling with this idea.

- ✓ What kind of faith am I living?
- ✓ And is my faith having a positive effect on the people around me?
- ✓ Is my faith lukewarm?
- ✓ Or is my faith passionate, active and alive?
- ✓ Does the way I live my faith change people's lives?
- ✓ What kind of faith am I living?
- ✓ And is my faith having a positive effect on the people around me?

Let's pray:

Holy God, fill us with your active and alive Holy Spirit. Speak to us and drive us. May we live in a way that draws people closer to you, and closer to one another. I pray in the name of your Son Jesus. Amen.