

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 15, 2029

1 Kings 18:21-39

“Stay on the Lord’s Side”

Then Elijah said to all the people, “How long will you stagger around on two crutches? If the LORD is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him.” But the people did not answer him a single word.

Then Elijah said to the people, “I am the only one left of the LORD’s prophets, but the prophets of Baal total four hundred fifty men. Provide two bulls for us. Let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it up and place it on the firewood, but they are not to light the fire. Then you will call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers with fire, he is God.”

All the people said, “This proposal is good.”

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose for yourselves one bull, and you go first because there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god. But do not light the fire.”

So they took the bull which had been given to them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning until noon. “Baal! Answer us!” But there was not a sound. No one answered. So they staggered around the altar they had made.

When noon came, Elijah mocked them: “Shout louder! He is a god, isn’t he? He may be deep in thought or busy or on a journey. Perhaps he is asleep and will wake up!” So they cried out with a loud voice, and according to their practice they cut themselves with daggers and spears until their blood flowed. After noon, they kept up a prophetic frenzy until the time of the evening sacrifice, but there was no sound. No one answered. There was no response.

Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” So 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 of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come and had proclaimed, “Your name shall be Israel.” He built the stones into an altar in the name of the LORD. Around it he made a trench big enough to hold about twenty-five pounds of seed. He arranged the wood, cut up the bull, and placed it on the wood.

Then he said, “Fill the trench with water and pour it on the sacrifice and on the wood.” Then he said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it on the sacrifice and on the wood.” Then he said, “Do it again.” So they did it again. Then he said, “Do it a third time.” So they did it a third time. The water flowed all around the altar. It even filled the trench.

When the time of the evening sacrifice had arrived, Elijah the prophet stood up and said, “O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and that I have done all things by your word. Answer me, LORD! Answer me so that this people will know that you, O LORD, are God and that you are turning their hearts back to you.”

Fire from the LORD fell on the sacrifice and on the wood, the stones, and the dirt. It even licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell on their knees and said, “The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!”

This is a competition. To the casual observer, it may appear to be a competition between the prophet Elijah and the hundreds of prophets who oppose him. But that is only to the casual observer. And it is the

purpose of this pulpit to make you more than a casual observer of the text. Who is the competition on Mt. Carmel really between? If you say it's really between the Lord and Baal, you're still not quite there. But you're getting closer. The competition is really between the Lord and Satan. Baal is not real; a competition with him is no competition at all. Satan is real, and he is the one behind the fiction that Baal is God. He is behind every lie that turns hearts away from the Lord.

And what determines the outcome of this competition between the Lord and Satan? It is not numbers. It is not the quality of the altar or the amount of dancing or the amount of blood shed or the volume of hollering or the frenzy of activity or the biting of the mockery. None of that determines the outcome. It is, the simple fact that Elijah states in his prayer: **"...you, O LORD, are God."** The Lord wins because he is not only real, he is the one and only almighty God. And although Satan, who is standing behind that dummy god Baal, is real and powerful, he is so much weaker that the Lord not only wins with a fireworks show, he completely shuts down the devil's power to do anything.

So the Lord wins that Mount Carmel competition. But what award does the Lord receive on Carmel? Some compete for money or pride, others for fame or for just the satisfaction of knowing they won. Others compete because they can't help it; if they're not engaged constantly in contest, they get bored. On Mount Carmel, the Lord is competing for – and winning – hearts. Listen closely to Elijah's appeal: **"Answer me so that this people will know that you, O LORD, are God and that you are turning their hearts back to you."** And later, after the fireworks: **When all the people saw this, they fell on their knees and said, "The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!"** The Israelites did not often repent and turn their hearts back to the Lord, and when they did, it didn't last long. But on this day, for this day at least, the Lord had won their hearts. It wasn't so much about proving his power over the devil. It was about winning the hearts of people, bringing them to his side.

In the Gospel there is another struggle, another competition to see who's stronger: Jesus or a stubborn, dangerous demon. The disciples cannot drive the demon out, but Jesus can. Because this contest is also really between the Lord and Satan! And Jesus, the Lord God in the flesh, shows his power over that minion of the Devil. Why does he do it? To show off? To win money? To show us he's stronger, yes! But even more, to win hearts. To win the hearts of his disciples, the heart of the boy, the heart of his father, whose faith was wavering. To show them not only that the Lord is powerful, but that the Lord loves them. When the Lord competes, and beats Satan, it is to win hearts.

Not long after, there was another mountaintop competition. And like the contest on Mount Carmel, the real participants could be misidentified. It might appear that this struggle is against Jesus and the Romans, or between Jesus and the religious leaders who wanted him to die. But that is misreading the situation. Jesus does not struggle against the Romans at all, and does not even bother to answer the taunts of the religious leaders. Rather than fight them, he asks his Father to forgive them. The struggle on Mount Calvary is, once again and always, against Satan – against his hateful grip on sinners and against the gates of hell.

On Mount Carmel, the divine pyrotechnics completed the sacrifice. On Mount Calvary, the sacrifice came first. Then came the fireworks: the curtain torn top to bottom, God removing the barrier of sin that separated sinners from him. The earth shaking and dead saints rising to tell the outcome of the struggle. Three days later, the sacrifice himself rising to prove his victory. Otherwise, the whole scene might have been misinterpreted as a Satanic victory. It wasn't. It was the Lord's victory over Satan and all his favorite things: sin, death, and hell.

Does the victorious sacrifice of Jesus on the altar of the cross on Mount Calvary prove that God is stronger than Satan? Of course. But how many times must that point be made, anyway? This is not mostly about God's superior power over the devil. As it is every time the Lord's beats the devil, it's mostly about winning our hearts. What do you see for yourself in the victory of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross? It was about you, for you, to save you from your sin, to deliver you from Satan's grasp, to rescue you from hell. The cross is God's power, surely, but much more the victory there is God's eternal love for you. And it is to win your heart.

Thank God we have seen the victory on Calvary, and the Spirit has blessed us to see it as our victory in Jesus. He has won our hearts with his loving victory on Mount Calvary. He has brought our hearts to his side with his love for us.

By now we should get the point that Satan is less powerful than the Lord. But we should also know this: Satan is more powerful than we are alone. And there is also a struggle between him and us. This is why St. Paul tells all Christians not to fight against Satan on their own: **Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can stand against the schemes of the Devil.** The devil cannot overpower the Lord. The best he can hope for is to win against unaware, unequipped, unready individual Christians who do not stay with the Lord and use his power to beat the Devil. Satan fights with lies – all kinds of lies. Paul pictures these lies as flaming arrows flying toward us and writes: **At all times hold up the shield of faith, with which you are able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the Evil One.** Arrow after arrow, lie after lie, all designed to take down Christians and set them on fire.

We cannot consider every lie of the Evil One, and what part of the Christian faith to hold up to extinguish each lie. But there is one fiery lie that is especially dangerous, especially lethal to the faith that keeps us at God's side, and it is the lie Satan told to the people of Israel. Let's return to Mount Carmel and see what lie they were letting through, into their souls. Before the competition of the sacrifices, Elijah said to them: **"How long will you stagger around on two crutches? If the LORD is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him."** Do you see the lie Satan was using to take them down? "It's perfectly fine to follow the Lord and some other god at the same time. You can have it both ways, or every which way. And it's just fine."

That is a lie. The Lord says if you are on his side, you follow him. You give your life to him. You listen to his will and do it. If he says a thing pleases him, you do it. If he says it displeases him, you abandon it as evil. But you can't live both ways, siding with the Lord and your own will.

And you can't stay on his side and stay with some other god – whether it's Baal or money or your own comfort or even your family. But Satan still fires that arrow at the Lord's people. And, to some extent, we all let it land.

For at least that day, on that mountain at least, the Lord won the hearts of the Israelites by beating Satan. He brought them to his side. Remember that other mountain where the Lord beat Satan, and how the love he showed you there brought you to his side.

That is the shield of faith the Lord hands you. Hold it up always! It is this truth: The Lord, on whose side we stand, is surely more powerful than the devil – we fight with the Lord and with his power. But even mightier than his power is his love, that won our hearts and brought us to his side. Jesus' victory is not only God's victory over the devil, it's the victory that he in love gives you.

That is what brought you to his side, and that is shield of faith to hold up always against Satan's lies, to stay on the Lord's side. Amen.