

“The Lord indeed is God!” May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Today we settle in for the long Season after Pentecost, sometimes known as ordinary time. It starts a bit early this year because Easter was early, and we’ll follow it all the way to the first Sunday of Advent on November 27. One of the many things I like about this long church season is that each week it allows us to hear how the Israelites learned about God’s power; to know that the early churches often experienced the same struggles we experience; and, most importantly, to hear the lessons Jesus taught about how to follow him.

We begin this long season with today’s *long* lesson from First Kings, that puts Elijah the Tishbite, whose name means “*the Lord is my God,*” up against four hundred and fifty prophets of the Canaanite god Baal, believed by those who worshiped him to be responsible for rain and the land’s productivity. Ultimately it becomes not only a battle of the prophets, but of Elijah’s God—our God—against Baal. It helps to know the backstory. Three years have passed since any rain has fallen, and Samaria is experiencing a severe drought. Elijah is sent to announce that his Lord—our Lord—will send rain. But first, Elijah instructs Ahab, the king of Samaria to gather the Israelites *and* the prophets of Baal to hear what he has to say. Then Elijah takes care to ensure that Baal and his prophets receive every advantage in the pending competition. Despite their advantage, we are not surprised to learn that our God wins, after valiant—and *violent*—efforts by Baal’s prophets to wake up their god so they can win the contest.

Like so many stories from the Old Testament, this could be a scene from a Cecille B. DeMille movie made in the first half of the twentieth century. With all the drama that surrounds the event, we could easily overlook what’s important here. It’s a reminder of God’s almighty power and purpose, of course, but that’s not all. Hear these words from Elijah to the Israelites: 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.” The Israelites have been “covering their bases,” making sure they’re protected to some extent for every possible outcome. Do they believe in the one true God? Surely so, but not enough to put their complete trust in God. The competition isn’t about who is more powerful—God or Baal—but rather a demonstration designed to show the Israelites, one more time, who is really in charge.

Fast forward several thousand years, and we find a similar situation in the churches in the Roman province of Galatia. Paul begins this letter without his customary thanksgiving, first setting out the credentials of his call to serve Jesus Christ and the Church. His letter to the Galatians is arguably his most confrontational and passionately argued letter. The problem, although it’s not stated in today’s passage, are the issues of circumcision and other regulatory laws of Moses, and the insistence by a group of Jewish-Christians that Gentile Christians be required to follow those laws and traditions. Paul calls their teachings false, a different gospel than the one handed down by Jesus Christ. “If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!” he says.

Not unlike Elijah in our passage from First Kings, Paul doesn’t hesitate to admonish the Galatians for their practices and beliefs. First he expresses his astonishment that they have deserted the Gospel of Christ. Later he asks *them* questions that confess his misgivings about his own words and behavior. “Am I now seeking human approval or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” In both the Old Testament and Epistle lessons, we see men who have been called to serve God struggling to keep their people focused on God’s purposes rather than their own purposes. That clearly is not an easy task.

And then we come to the Gospel lesson about Jesus and the centurion. Upon Jesus' arrival in Capernaum, he's met by a delegation of men who have come to plead the centurion's cause. The first interesting note is that the delegation is made up of Jewish elders, as Luke calls them, a description that leads us to think they are not followers of Jesus. Yet here they are, asking Jesus to heal the centurion's slave, even though the centurion is not "one of them." Jesus, as we know, does not discriminate, and so off he goes with these Jewish elders to see what he can do for the slave. Before he gets there he's stopped by a message delivered through the centurion's friends: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy...only speak the word and let my servant be healed." A couple of other interesting notes from this passage: Jesus and the centurion communicate only through others and Jesus never sees either the centurion or the slave, but the slave is healed. Jesus' only comment is about the centurion: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

When we ask ourselves what we are to learn from these three lessons, we may need to spend some time thinking about it. Which of these people and situations speak to us and why? Who do we resemble? Is it the Israelites, who are covering their bases by worshipping both God and Baal, or the Galatians, who adjusted the Gospel of Christ to fit their own desires and practices? Is it Elijah or Paul, both of whom took seriously their call to not only serve God, but to call to account those who professed to follow God the Father and God the Son? Or is it the centurion, who so strongly and humbly believed in the power of Christ that it wasn't necessary for him to see Christ? Where do you find yourself in these scriptures?

When I ask myself that question, I have to confess that I am probably more like the Israelites and the Galatians than I am like Elijah or Paul or the centurion. Admitting that catches me up short. I wish that like Elijah and Paul, I had the courage to live faithfully into my call, to say the hard things that often need to be said and to address the issues that need to be addressed, without worrying about whether it will disrupt the peace, or even ask myself whether I am seeking human approval or God's approval, whether I am trying to please people or please God. I pray that going forward I will always remember that my call to serve our God in Christ is not about pleasing anyone other than God, and to know in my heart, just as the centurion did, that through his love and grace, our Lord Christ will provide what I need when I need it, and will give me the strength to do and say what he is calling me to do and say. What about you? What is God asking of you, and how will you pray about it?

Two quotes seem appropriate. The first is from Bob Deffinbaugh, who said, "Most of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ could probably live a lot closer to the edge than we do. It is when we are on the edge that we more often and more dramatically see His hand. I am not, by this, calling for foolishness or "testing God," but simple obedience to His commands." The second quote is from Frederick Buechner, who wrote that "This side of Paradise, it is our business (not, like so many, peddlers of God's word but as men and women of sincerity) to speak with our hearts (which is what sincerity means) and to bear witness to, and live out of, and live toward, and live by, the true word of his holy story as it seeks to stammer itself forth through the holy stories of us all."

"The Lord indeed is God." And so we pray: Lord, give us the strength to speak with our hearts, to bear witness to and live out of and live toward and by the true word of your holy story. Guide us to live closer to the edge, to see your hand in our lives and in our service to you. Help us to be obedient, humbly trusting in your love and mercy and grace. *Amen.*