

*Elijah versus Baal*

There's no way around it, the Bible is a violent book. There is a constant battle of good and evil, God's way versus all other ways, from Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis to Michael the Archangel fighting the beast in the Revelation. The Bible does not advocate or glorify violence, and neither does the church. But violence is an unavoidable fact of human life and the Bible does not shy away from it.

In today's reading from 1 Kings we find the prophet Elijah on the run for his life from Queen Jezebel who promised to kill him. While he was on the lam, angels ministered to him. Why did Jezebel threaten to kill Elijah? To understand this story we need to recap an earlier violent conflict Elijah was involved in with the prophets of the pagan god Baal. We'll have a lot more to say about Baal in few moments. What's important for us to know right now is that King Ahab of Israel, under the influence of his wife, the evil Queen Jezebel, was worshiping both Baal and The Lord. The Lord will not allow that; we are to worship Him and Him only.

So Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest of sorts, to see whose god really was God. Early in the morning, a bull was slaughtered and put on an altar. It was said that the god who sent fire to light the sacrifice was the real, true God. The prophets of Baal danced around their altar and called on Baal to send lightning. When nothing happened they slashed themselves with knives and shouted all the louder, all the while Elijah mocked them.

This went on until evening. Then Elijah built an altar to the Lord, put a bull on it, and soaked it with water three times. Then, as God commanded, Elijah prayed, and The Lord rained down fire from on high. It burnt up the bull, and the altar, and everything around it. The people then knew that the Lord of Israel was God, not Baal. And Elijah ordered all the prophets of Baal there, some four-hundred of them, to be put to the sword. They were executed immediately.

Now hold on, hold on, hold on! Why did Elijah have the prophets of Baal killed? Hadn't Elijah ever heard of Interfaith Dialog? Why didn't Elijah just invite the prophets of Baal to a conference center for a weekend in some resort town, have a few guest speakers from the seminary come in to talk about the similarities of Baal worship and the worship of The Lord, and then issue a joint statement saying something like: "The prophets of Baal and the prophets of The Lord recognize that we are each conscience bound to our own faith traditions. This does not have to lead to conflict. In fact, we celebrate this diversity and encourage each other to be faithful to our own particular confessions, while we work together on several joint agricultural projects." Before you know it the Baal worshipers and the Israelites would be exchanging pastors and holding joint worship services.

Of course, I'm being facetious (and probably way too "over the top"). Dialog is preferable to violence. But I was shocked by this: If you go to this passage in the Lutheran Study Bible, in the commentary in the margin it says, "Does passion for faith ever go too far? What do you make of Elijah's execution of the false prophets?" The way that questions is asked, I infer that whoever wrote that commentary was implying that what Elijah did was

wrong. Could Elijah be wrong? Elijah is considered one the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. God worked and spoke through him like nobody else. At Jesus' Transfiguration, Elijah was there with Jesus and Moses. Whatever Elijah did, he only did it because he was absolutely sure the Lord was telling him to.

So then is the implication that God is really the one wrong here? Can God ever be wrong? I would say unequivocally, "No!" Whatever God ordains is right. God cannot be judged as right and wrong according to our human standards. Whatever God does is right because God does it. He's the Creator; He makes the rules. So why would God condone what seems to our modern sensitivities as the unjustified slaughter of the prophets of Baal?

To answer that question we need to understand something about Baal worship. Different varieties of Baal worship were popular throughout the ancient Near East. The Promised Land that God led the Israelites to had previously been populated by Canaanites who worshipped Baal. Baal was thought to be the god of lightening, a god of nature and fertility that brought the rain necessary to grow crops.

It was believed that Baal slept in the underworld during the winter and then awoke in the spring to couple with his consort Asherah, which caused the spring's renewal of the earth and made crops grow. Worshipping Baal was considered an exercise that insured the fertility of the earth as well as human fertility. Although The Lord had ordered that all vestiges of Baal worship be rooted out of the Promised Land, Baal worship continued and some

Israelites participated in it. That was a big problem because Baal worship was an abomination to The Lord and totally unacceptable to Him.

What was specifically so bad about Baal worship? Two things, in particular, and I'll try to be gentle and discreet since this is a family worship service.

First of all, Baal worship was sexually perverse. It involved temple prostitution for both males and females. Baal worship often took the form of an orgy. I'll stop there. It's was degrading as anything you can imagine.

Second, Baal worship involved child sacrifice. Live children were placed on an altar and burned to death. Sexual perversion and child sacrifice are, of course, two things our God detests; and His people were doing them hoping this other god Baal would bless with them prosperity and fertility. That is an abomination. No wonder God insisted on doing whatever was necessary to wipe out Baal worship without a trace left behind so as not to risk it infecting and corrupting His people.

Elijah may have slaughtered the prophets Baal but Baal worship still exists today. No one calls it Baal worship today, but it's as popular as ever. Consider sexuality today: The Biblical standard is that we be faithful within marriage and chaste if single. People often laugh at that standard today as hopelessly outdated. Say you believe that and people will call you a "prude." I recently read an autobiographical book written by a man who was divorced and who fell in love with a woman that was married. They decided she would divorce her husband and marry him, although her husband was faithful to her and treated her well. The author talked about this with his pastor, expecting her to say that what he and the woman were

planning was wrong, but instead she supported and encouraged him. How do you justify that from Holy Scripture! You cannot! You simply can't.

The week after next our national church body will be voting on a Human Sexuality Statement and policy recommendations. Many people fear we will be abandoning our Biblical values. God forbid we go the way of Ahab and Jezebel by undermining marriage and family and endorsing immorality! Trusting in God, Elijah took a bold stand, he was no coward. I pray that God might give our church that same faith and courage now to stand on God's Word in our time.

Well, we might say that at least there is no child sacrifice today... or is there? Thousands of children around the world die each day because of hunger or because of diseases that are treatable. These children's deaths could be prevented -- we have the medical and financial resources to save them -- what we don't have is the will or the commitment. Politics and economics, and especially greed and the lust for power, get in the way of saving children's lives. That's tantamount to killing them. Essentially we have sacrificed these children for our own prosperity.

Our concern for children should extend to children in the womb as well, but often they are unjustifiably sacrificed too. I know Abortion is a controversial topic and there is much that could be said about it. I'll limit my comments this morning to just two quotes. The universally respected Mother Teresa said, "It is a poverty to decide that a child must die so that you may live as you wish." And the influential twentieth century Lutheran theologian and martyr Dietrick Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Ethics*:

“Destruction of the embryo in the mother’s womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life. And that is nothing but murder. A great many motives may lead to an action of this kind; indeed in cases where it is an act of despair, performed in circumstances of extreme human or economic destitution and misery, the guilt may often lie rather with the community than with the individual. All these considerations must no doubt have a quite decisive influence on our personal and pastoral attitude towards the person concerned, but they cannot in any way alter the fact of murder.”

We see clearly, then, that the battle goes on: Good versus evil, The Lord versus Baal, Christian faith against perversion and child sacrifice. These battles will continue until Christ comes again. Like Elijah, sometimes we will have inspiring victories and at other times demoralizing defeats. Why? Only God knows why. But God calls us to keep fighting the good fight of faith. God is not calling us to slaughter anybody. That is definitely not what I’m saying. Elijah lived in one moment in time and we live in another. His mission is not our mission, but they are similar in that we are called to take a bold stand for the Lord, for both His Word and His ways, and often we do so at great personal risk, at the risk of the displeasure and contempt of our family, friends, and peers

But we will not be alone in our struggles. God is with us. His holy angels will tend us. We will be strengthened for our journey with the Bread of Life. God will see us through. His will be done. Amen.