

1Kings 18:15 Elijah replied, “As the LORD of Hosts lives, whom I serve, I will appear before him this very day.”

1Kings 18:16 Obadiah went to find Ahab, and informed him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah. ¹⁷ When Ahab caught sight of Elijah, Ahab said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” ¹⁸ He retorted, “It is not I who have brought trouble on Israel, but you and your father’s House, by forsaking the commandments of the LORD and going after the Baalim. ¹⁹ Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, together with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

1Kings 18:20 Ahab sent orders to all the Israelites and gathered the prophets at Mount Carmel. ²¹ Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” ***But the people answered him not a word.*** ²² Then Elijah said to the people, “I am the only prophet of the LORD left, while the prophets of Baal are four hundred and fifty men. ²³ Let two young bulls be given to us. Let them choose one bull, cut it up, and lay it on the wood, but let them not apply fire; I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, and will not apply fire. ²⁴ You will then invoke your god by name, and I will invoke the LORD by name; and let us agree: the god who responds with fire, that one is God.” And all the people answered, “Very good!”

There are many stories we have heard before from this library we call **the Bible**, stories that we might remember from childhood. We have one of these today. This involves the man we have come to call ELIJAH, even though his actual name is Eliyahu. His name actually **really** matters. Why? His name, a Hebrew name, literally means “My God, the LORD is He.” This man’s name tells the story that we should know. All we need is his name. Eli Adonai shemo, the LORD is his name.

Like lots of you, I believe I heard this story in Sunday School. It was a story of a showdown, a contest, at a place called Mt. Carmel. And it involves Canaanites, the people who were in ancient

Israel before the people of Abraham came to be there. Let us remember that the people of Canaan were to be punished by God for their wicked ways, and the punishment was having the people of Abraham come to take their place in the land. So there is quite a big message in the Bible warning people to not be like the Canaanites. Well, this morning, this is exactly the problem. The people of Abraham have wandered away, and they seem to have forgotten who they are, and they have forgotten the God of Life who had rescued them from Egypt.

Maybe you remember this story from long ago about a bad King named Ahab, and his foreign wife Jezebel, who worships all the wrong gods and goddesses. The Canaanites were known for worshipping two different kinds of gods, the Baalim and the Asheroth. You might recognize the name Baal, often called “BALE” by us, like a bale of hay! This is actually a giant bull in the sky. And there are more than one of them, so Eliyahu will refer to them as the Baalim, which is plural. He also mentions the Asherah, which is like some kind of mother earth. And yes, the Baalim and the Asheroth get together to bring life on the earth. This is why the Canaanites had what was called a fertility cult, which involved lots of sexuality. Enough about that for now.

Here we have Eliyahu, the man with this great name, “*my God the LORD is He,*” and he has been sent to the north to call the people back to faithfulness to the God of Life. He has to stand against this bad king Ahab and his wife Jezebel, who has actually killed the Prophets of the God of Israel. Elijah says that HE is the only one left of them all! But he will challenge them to the life and death contest where he will be outnumbered 450 to 1. And before the

contest begins, he shouts out to the people of Israel, people who should know better. And he has a serious question for them: “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions, (literally two tree branches) ? IF THE LORD IS GOD, FOLLOW HIM; AND IF BAAL, FOLLOW HIM!” Tragically, he corners the people with these words, and they have a most terrible and profound response: ***But the people answered him not a word.***

We don't have the rest of the story here, but there is a contest between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal. Each has one young bull to sacrifice, and wood. They build their altar areas for the sacrifice, putting the bulls on the wood. And then they pray. 450 prophets of the Baalim pray, against 1 prophet of the Living God who also prays. The 450 pray for a long time, dancing and cutting themselves, until they are worn out! Finally Elijah calls for water to be dumped on his sacrifice, which they do. And he prays for God to show the people who is real. And fire comes from the sky and the offering is burnt before all their eyes. And the people who earlier had not said a word now cry out THE LORD ALONE IS GOD, THE LORD ALONE IS GOD.

It matters what we believe, and it matters what we believe about God. Sometimes we might think that it really doesn't matter. In fact there is a famous quote from Thomas Jefferson in which he said ***“But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”*** That is a fun quote. But ultimately it does matter what we believe about God, because those beliefs directly impact our actions and attitudes. We should not harm other humans if we truly believe that all people are children of God. If we believe that all are

created in the Image of God, we should be concerned about their well-being. There are all sorts of beliefs and actions that are directly connected to what we say we believe about God. So it matters what we believe about God. And because of that it really matters that we not get off-track by believing in something else that is not the Living God. And this is actually the #1 danger for humans in the Bible. If we believe in a false god, if we think that something else is our god, it will control us. And if it is not really the One True God, the God of Life, then we will be flying and driving blind, and much will go wrong.

The #1 possible crime to commit in the first 80% of the Bible is to have a false god, and this is what we call IDOLATRY. The worst thing we can do is to have an IDOL. You have heard me share this before. We have grown far too comfortable with this word IDOL. In fact our Puritan ancestors in New England would roll over in their graves to hear that they helped create a place 400 years ago, that now enjoys an American Idol.

What is an IDOL? It is simply something that pretends to be God, but is not. It sits in our hearts, and it affects how we live our lives. It sits at the center of us, and it is often what matters the most for us in life. Make no mistake, every single one of us has something that sits at the center of our lives, and this Something does have great control over what we think and what we do. Something is always going to sit in that command chair. We can try to settle this quickly by asking a question: What do we live for? What is more important for us than anything else? What drives us, what motivates us? This question must be asked, and it must be addressed in some way. What is our ultimate concern? What motivates us?

My sermon title is easy to understand. The Same OLD Story. I had the word OLD capitalized just to make the point that this is an OLD human problem. What sits at the center of our lives? What has had that place for generations of people who have come before us? Has it been the God of Life, the God of Goodness? Or has it been something else. What things motivate people in this world? Many people of faith would look at our country today and suggest that we have three big cities that represent the 3 false gods that have too much influence among us. New York, Washington DC, and Los Angeles. New York is the center of MONEY with Wall Street and all that. Are people motivated by money? We can answer that. What about Washington DC ? People would suggest that it represents POWER, which very often leads right back to money as well. And then we have LA, amazingly called the city of Angels. I don't know about that one. But it would seem to represent Fame, Glamour, and Sex, things that also point back towards cash. But these things are false gods, they are idols, and they will not bring us life. They will just drain life from us if we let them.

In our story today we might think "Well, we no longer have to worry about the Baalim or the Ashteroth of the Canaanites, thank goodness." Well, we might not call them by these names, but we have idols of our own that seem to have a lot of control in our world. I have heard people say in recent years that they don't care what is happening in the world as long as their investments and 410K are doing well. They don't care what is happening to others as long as their group still has power and advantage. And they don't care what happens to others as long as we can still celebrate the lifestyles of the rich and famous! Just keep us entertained! In the spirit

of Eliyahu, what should we do? Well, first, we need to keep reading these old stories. The world has changed in 3,000 years. But we humans have not. That's why the Bible matters so much. Everything we need to know about human nature is already there. If I could add just one more plea to these words for today, it is simply this: We all have a place at the center of our lives, where something has influence over us. We need to know what that control is. If it is the God of Life and God of Goodness, we will feel peace, and our priorities should be in good shape. But if there is something else that motivates us, that truly is an idol, we need to figure that out. May the Spirit of God give us the courage and the strength to take that deep look within. AMEN.