

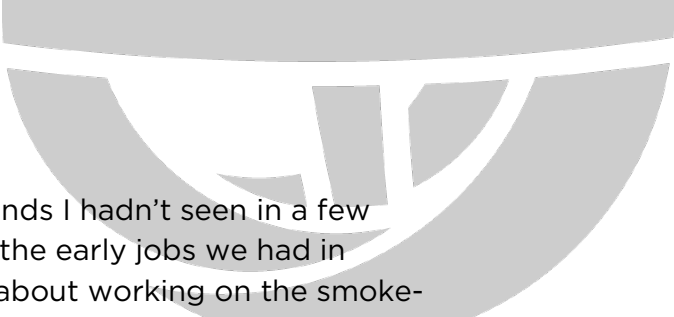
Mount Carmel: A Place Our Hearts are Turned Toward God
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

I Kings 18:20-40 NRSV

²⁰So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. ²¹Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "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. ²²Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred and fifty. ²³Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." All the people answered, "Well spoken!" ²⁵Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it." ²⁶So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. ²⁷At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." ²⁸Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. ²⁹As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

³⁰Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me;" and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; ³¹Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name;" ³²with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. ³³Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood." ³⁴Then he said, "Do it a second time;" and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time;" and they did it a third time, ³⁵so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

³⁶At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. ³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." ³⁸Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God." ⁴⁰Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.



The other night I got together with some college friends I hadn't seen in a few years. At one point, the conversation turned toward the early jobs we had in college and just after college. Someone told a story about working on the smoke-filled floor of Mystic Lake casino, as a "cage cashier", back before the smoking ban was put into effect. Someone else shared about working on a theatre project and having to rehearse between 2:30 and 6am because it was the only time the stage was available. I shared about the summer I worked for an ag company driving truck 16 hours a day spraying fields. We all agreed that those were some of the toughest jobs we had, and that if at all possible, we wouldn't want to do them ever again.

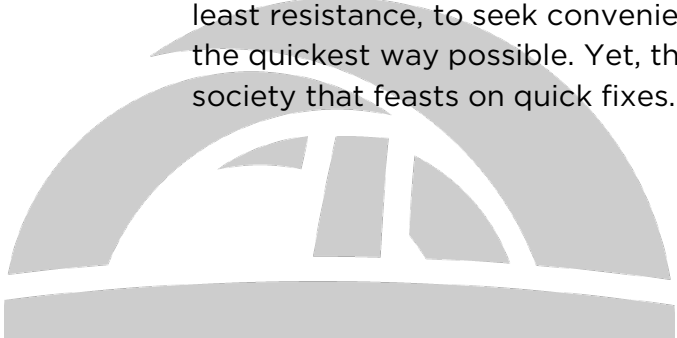
Elijah was a prophet who had a tough job that no one would really want. He had to bring a hard word to people who didn't want to hear it and certainly weren't inclined to act on what he had to say. He was sent to Ahab, the king of Israel, to tell him that the way he ruled was just plain rotten. Ahab followed in a long line of kings of Israel who didn't measure up to God's standards, and they certainly didn't do the people they ruled any favors. There were scandals, invasions, droughts, and other forms of suffering. They ignored God's Law and the covenant. They were ruthless. And Ahab was said to be the worst of all.

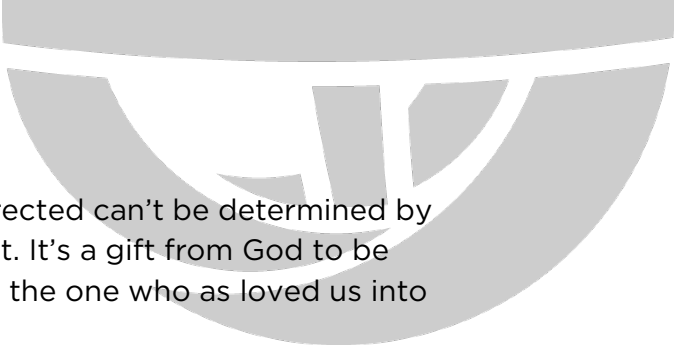
To make matters worse, the people had also given up on worshiping God alone. They turned their hearts toward gods like Asherah, who was like a sex god, said to bring fertility to people and the land. And there were other gods like Baal, who Queen Jezebel promised would bring rain and storms in times of drought. Given their situation, it's no wonder they went chasing idols who seemed to promise something so tangible as to fix their immediate problems. In the face of suffering, desperate times sometimes call for desperate measures.

Elijah saw all this and knew those gods wouldn't measure up to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Who is the creator of heaven and earth after all? Yahweh. Who delivered the people out of slavery in Egypt? Yahweh. Who gave power to the kings in the first place? Yahweh. And who would bring an end to this drought? Not some rain god named Baal. It was Yahweh!

Elijah questioned the people, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" In other words, he was saying, "Having it both ways is no way at all. Choose wisely in whom and what you ultimately place your trust."

In moments of fear, or scarcity, or uncertainty, it is natural to choose a path of least resistance, to seek convenient solutions that get us out of our discomfort in the quickest way possible. Yet, this rarely produces the best results. We live in a society that feasts on quick fixes. The saying often goes: Have a problem? There's





an app for that. Where our trust - our hearts - are directed can't be determined by an app. Our faith is not a tool to be used as we see fit. It's a gift from God to be tested and nurtured and shaped by relationship with the one who has loved us into being.

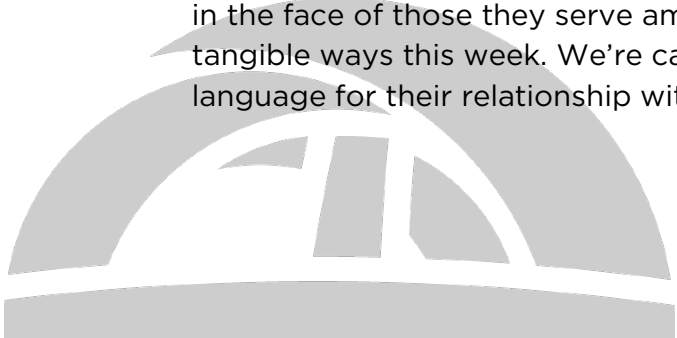
That may be where I would caution us to not get too caught up in the glitz of Elijah's sacred stunt - in the dancing and chanting, and folly of the prophets of Baal - or the lighting and fire that comes down from heaven as Elijah prays.


Before any spark from heaven, Elijah stepped up to the ruined altar and restored it. He set twelve stones to remind the people of their ancestors from the twelve tribes of Israel, and of the name they bear as a people - Israel, which literally means "those who struggle with God." I've always loved that God's people are not expected to be blind followers, or passive in faith, but to actively engage God in the struggle of faith. Being reminded of who they were and to whom they belonged tripped something in the people's hearts. By the time Elijah offered a prayer, as only one who knows whom he belongs can, God did the rest. Faith and hope were restored, and the people's hearts were turned back toward God.

Though this grand display offered the people a mountaintop experience, it's not what happens on the mountaintop that makes the most difference in the long run. It's what happens to the restored relationship and commitment to walk in this faith when we come back down off the mountain. What do we do with the gift of faith in this incredible God?

In today's pluralistic world ideas, political ideologies, cultures, and religions bump into each other every day, much like they did in ancient Israel. However, we strive to find ways to live alongside one another more successfully than in ancient days. I'd like to believe we've evolved into a more tolerant society, where we don't have to obliterate those who think or believe something that we don't. Believing that one's faith is a winner take all sport has done so much more harm than good in our world, and it is breaking the faith of many of our young people whose daily life is filled with cross-cultural and interreligious relationships. I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with people who want to have a meaningful faith, but struggle because of what some Christian leaders have made God out to be.

As people of faith, we are called to be prophets to the next generation - to create meaningful faith experiences with our young people. That's why we are sending nine youth and five adults to Washington, DC today. We pray they will meet God in the face of those they serve among and experience the power of God in tangible ways this week. We're called to restore the altar of faith and give them language for their relationship with God that has substance. This takes knowing





what it means to restore the altar of our own faith and why it matters for us and for the world.

About ten years ago, Eboo Patel was a featured speaker at spirituality grand rounds at Mayo. Patel is an American Muslim, with family roots in India. He is the founder of Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based non-profit where people of different faiths, worldviews, and traditions can bridge differences and find common values to build a shared life together. Much of their work happens on college and high school campuses. Patel also spoke to a group of young people and faith leaders at B'nai Israel Synagogue that week. During the discussion, someone asked him if the goal of Interfaith Youth Core was to get rid of all of the differences in religion, which is sometimes how religious pluralism is characterized. His response changed the way I thought about how we work alongside people of different faiths. He said his goal for interfaith work is help people to see where there are commonalities in various faith traditions, but also that this work makes each person more familiar with and committed to their own faith.

You see, when we bump into other people's faiths or lack of faith, when we hear different ideas or see different types of practices of faith; God is at work there. Rather than fear of the other, perhaps we plumb the depths of our own faith to understand better where our hearts are directed, and see others as made in the image of God as well. Perhaps through conversation with our neighbors, we find language to speak with love what we experience and know is truth. And when we do, our hearts too will fill with gratitude and praise, shouting "Indeed, the Lord is God." Amen.

