

### *Hobbling between Opinions*

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is that you, the one who troubles Israel?" Elijah answered, "I haven't troubled Israel; you and your father's house have! You did as much when you deserted the LORD's commands and followed the Baals. Now send a message and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel. Gather the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table." Ahab sent the message to all the Israelites. He gathered the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah approached all the people and said, "How long will you hobble back and forth between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal." The people gave no answer. Elijah said to the people, "I am the last of the LORD's prophets, but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty. Give us two bulls. Let Baal's prophets choose one. Let them cut it apart and set it on the wood, but don't add fire. I'll prepare the other bull, put it on the wood, but won't add fire. Then all of 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—that's the real God!" All the people answered, "That's an excellent idea."

So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of these bulls. Prepare it first since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but don't add fire." So they took one of the bulls that had been brought to them. They prepared it and called on Baal's name from morning to midday. They said, "Great Baal, answer us!" But there was no sound or answer. They performed a hopping dance around the altar that had been set up. Around noon, Elijah started making fun of them: "Shout louder! Certainly he's a god! Perhaps he is lost in thought or wandering or traveling somewhere. Or maybe he is asleep and must wake up!" So the prophets of Baal cried with a louder voice and cut themselves with swords and knives as was their custom. Their blood flowed all over them. As noon passed they went crazy with their ritual until it was time for the evening offering. Still there was no sound or answer, no response whatsoever.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here!" All the people closed in, and he repaired the LORD's altar that had been damaged. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob—to whom the LORD's word came: "Your name will be Israel." He built the stones into an altar in the LORD's name, and he dug a trench around the altar big enough to hold two seahs of dry grain. He put the wood in order, butchered the bull, and placed the bull on the wood. "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the sacrifice and on the wood," he commanded. "Do it a second time!" he said. So they did it a second time. "Do it a third time!" And so they did it a third time. The water flowed around the altar, and even the trench filled with water. At the time of the evening offering, the prophet Elijah drew near and prayed: "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. I have done all these things at your instructions. Answer me, LORD! Answer me so that this people will know that you, LORD, are the real God and that you can change their hearts." Then the LORD's fire fell; it consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up the water in the trench! All the people saw this and fell on their faces. "The LORD is the real God! The LORD is the real God!" they exclaimed.

1 Kgs. 18:17-39 (C.E.B.)

I'm not sure how you voted on Tuesday. In fact, I'm not even sure *if* you voted on Tuesday – I mean some people vote early and some people opt out of the electoral process entirely. No matter how you voted, this election cycle is over.

Sigh. Now we get to look forward to the next one.

With every election, I find myself turning to John Wesley, the man who began the Methodist movement. (I am a Methodist, after all.) In his journal, he said,

I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them:

1. To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy
2. To speak no evil of the person they voted against, and

3. To take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.<sup>1</sup>

I don't know. I think it's pretty good advice, whether you are a Methodist or a Mennonite, a Democrat or a Republican, a Christian or a Muslim.

1. Don't sell your vote.
2. Don't speak evil of opposing candidates.
3. Be gracious toward those who disagree with you.

But as good as his advice may sound, it doesn't answer the question of how to judge who is "most worthy" of our vote. The process of discernment is never easy, and it isn't made easier with our binary election system that only gives us a choice between yes or no questions and one of two candidates for office.

That's when I read this story of Elijah and long for God's public witness to be so powerful no one can question the results.

Elijah lived among people who were worshipping and serving false gods.

So are we. The gods of our society have different names, but they are still a part of our culture. Rather than Baal, we have all kinds of balls – football, baseball, basketball. We also have the gods of success and power that were just as present in Elijah's day.

Elijah could see that his people were heading in the wrong direction.

Maybe we are, too. We may not all agree on what the right direction is, but many people will tell you we are heading in the wrong direction.

Elijah accuses the people of hobbling between the opinions of what to believe, yielding his highly charged and much-watched challenge we heard about in our scripture this morning (1 Kgs. 18:21). It was a challenge that Elijah – or more accurately – God handily won.

Unfortunately, this powerful demonstration didn't persuade them to change their opinions; that becomes obvious when we continue reading and see the aftermath. People still questioned the results. In the very next chapter, in fact, Elijah runs and hides from King Ahab who has mustered his troops to find and kill the prophet of God (1 Kgs. 19:10).

It makes you wonder if anyone even paid attention to what happened that day on Mount Carmel.

And yet, like Elijah, I still want some visible, dramatic proof of where God stands. Maybe you do, too. That's one of the reasons we love this story. We want to do what Elijah did – even if it won't change anyone's mind. We want a display of God's power to prove we are right. We want a showdown like Elijah had.

But there is a problem with replicating Elijah's showdown.

Showdowns don't solve problems. In the next few chapters, we learn that the people still went after their own gods. They still reject the God of Israel. They still wander off in the wrong direction.

Signs and wonders don't work. You may remember that Jesus was asked to show signs (see Jn. 2:18 and Lk. 16:31). And even though he was raised from the dead, there were still people who rejected him.

And it is no different today.

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of John Wesley, October 6, 1774.

We can have the best answer. We can have compelling evidence. We can write books and have lots of followers on social media. But we will not be able to persuade people to leave the gods they love, at least not with a dramatic showdown.

Elijah begins by asking how long the people will “hobble back and forth between two opinions” (1 Kgs. 18:21). The phrase is one that is hard to translate directly into English. It is captured better perhaps in a paraphrase like “how long are you going to sit on the fence” (1 Kgs. 18:21, Msg.)?

But this isn’t a battle between competing ideas; it’s a battle for our hearts. The people have been trying to serve both Baal and God, straddling the fence, pining after two different pathways for living, hobbling between two opinions.

King Ahab accuses Elijah of being the one who has caused trouble in Israel; Elijah lays the blame on the king (1 Kgs. 19:17-18).

How many times have we heard that refrain coming from politicians? The other side is always the cause of our problems; and it doesn’t matter which side you’re on the argument is the same.

If we’ve learned nothing from the past few decades in congress, we ought to have learned that arguing and debating and finger pointing does not change people’s opinions. Nor does it solve problems. It’s also true that having a slick presentation may get us a job, but it doesn’t help us fall in love – which is important to remember when we’re talking about a battle for our hearts.

When I first began thinking about my sermon for today, I was hoping the story of Elijah might offer some helpful ways to respond to the current political climate. I wanted to find a powerful way to express and convey my position. In the end, I realized Elijah’s showdown isn’t about the argument. And no matter how dramatic the proof, the results will probably not change another person.

Neither will pithy little one-liners.

It may make my commitments stronger. It may solidify or clarify my position. It may make me feel good about the position I’ve taken. It may give me more reasons to stand firm. But it will not change “the other person,” the one who represents another side of the argument – no matter what the issue may be.

Think about it for a moment. When was the last time you changed your mind about something? It doesn’t really matter how big the decision was.

What made you change your mind?

My guess is your heart was changed before your mind was. And a big show like Elijah puts on probably was not involved in your change of heart. Such a demonstration only makes me look for the flaws, for the ways Elijah cheated. (Now, I know he didn’t; but emotionally, I know if I were on the “other side” of the argument, this show would not likely change my mind. I would only think I had been tricked.)

Clearly, no minds were changed that day.  
Sadly, no hearts were won over, either.

It really does remind me of our national political environment – and maybe even our local politics as well.

I know what Wesley says:

1. Don't sell your vote.
2. Don't speak evil of opposing candidates.
3. Be gracious toward those who disagree with you.

But how are we to discern how best to vote?  
How can we find a way forward in a deeply divided nation?

I honestly think some of the answer comes – not from my Methodist background but – from the Anabaptist tradition. It boils down to how to work for peace, a process that begins when we recognize the sacred worth of the person who stands on the opposite side of an issue, on the other side of a border; the one who speaks a different language or votes for people in the other political party.

It is about letting my love for God help me see the Other as a beloved child of God, as my brother or my sister, rather than seeing them as my enemy.

In a book I read earlier this fall, it was pointed out that one of the great hindrances we are facing in our culture is that we tend to write off people who differ from us. Let me read just one sentence from the book:

The tendency to write off [Others] is rooted in the assumption that differences of identity are unbridgeable, that people are too invested in their privileges and interest to change, that the failure to achieve change in the past predicts failure in the future, that people and their opinions are monolithic and strong rather than complicated and fragile, and therefore the purpose of politics is to protect yourself from Others and galvanize your own instead of trying to reach across.<sup>2</sup>

The author goes on to suggest that the only way hearts can be changed is by inviting people into a space where their ideas and their words are welcome, into a relationship where the person knows they are more important than their political perspective.

It is about letting my love for God help me see the Other as a beloved child of God, as my brother or my sister, not my enemy.

It is a form of hospitality, a spiritual discipline that opens our hearts, as well as making room for the Other around the hearth of our homes. It is a discipline many of us have forgotten, but one which I think we would do well to reclaim.

I'm not always good at it, but when people invite me into an argument, I find the only way to invite a change is to give them a safe place in which to try on a new idea – not to make a commitment to it, but to see what it feels like. That can only take place in the context of a safe environment, a place where love is more important than ideas, a place where we are not waiting to say “Gotcha” or “I told you so.”

You see, it needs to be a place where it's also OK *not* to change your mind – and a place where I might change my opinion.

That is what I mean when I suggest we learn how to practice hospitality. Hospitality is about opening our heart to the other person, or as Wesley says it, to be gracious toward those who disagree with me.

As I said, I'm not always good at it. I still find myself hobbling between opinions. I still sit on the fence.

Rather than getting off the fence, though, I wonder if we should find ways to get rid of the fence. Maybe we let our love for God help us see the Other as a beloved child of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Anand Giridharadas, *The Persuaders* (Knopf, 2022), p. 13

Elijah thought his was the only voice speaking for God – an assumption he learns later is not at all accurate (1 Kgs. 18:22; 19:18). Sometimes we feel like we are alone, especially when our candidate loses.

I am convinced that repeating a confrontation like Elijah had will not change anyone’s heart – except perhaps our own. You see, on top of Mount Carmel Elijah learned that he was not alone; Elijah learned that God is still God, no matter what other people believe.

Not only is that still true, it is also good news!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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