

“Oblation”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
1 Kings 18:17-39
November 3, 2019 - All Saints' Sunday

Last week we heard about how the kingdom of Israel was split by small-minded men into the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Our reading today is about those folks in the north, those *wildlings* who were worshiping in the wrong places and in doing so inviting doom.

We pick up about a hundred years after King Jeroboam, during the time of King Ahab. The trouble that leads up to this story begins when Ahab marries a woman named Jezebel — and I really want to give a sermon about that name! Ahab starts worshiping the Canaanite god Baal. And now we run into the prophet Elijah. Elijah, as a prophet of the God of Israel, is indignant! This leads to a steel cage match throw-down between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and that is the fascinating story we're about to read.

I think it's helpful to note that when our text says “the LORD” — and if you see that word written in all-caps in your Bible — it's a stand in for the too-holy-to-be-spoken name of God as revealed to Moses. So when Elijah says, “If the LORD is God...” he's talking very specifically about the God of his ancestors, of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

That said, it's time for the Battle of the Gods. Let's get ready to rumble as we listen for the Word of God in this reading from 1 Kings:

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” He answered, “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.” So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel.

Elijah 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.

Then Elijah said to the people, “I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty. Let 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. Then 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!”

Then 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.” So 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.

At 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.” Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Then 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; Elijah 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”; with 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. Next 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.” Then 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, so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

At 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. Answer 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.”

Then 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. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now THAT’S an All Saints’ Sunday Bible story!

The people weren’t willing to choose between the God of Israel and Baal, but boy they were not going to miss this. There was little time to make posters, but I imagine some quick bets were placed in the crowd. Four hundred fifty prophets against one. Sacrifice and the possibility of divine fire. It’s the Super Bowl and the Iron Bowl combined, plus the blood of a championship boxing match and the theatrics and pyrotechnics of a KISS concert. Two Gods enter the octagon, only one will leave!

Except only one of the gods actually shows up.

The message, I believe, is fairly simple: follow the God who shows up. Don’t be tempted by the gods whose adherents are noisiest. Be faithful to the God who is known when the odds are long and the altar has been drenched. Don’t go in search of easy answers that ultimately fail. Trust that God will be there.

It has long been our tradition here to remember the faithful EPCers who have died in the past year. We have commended them to God's everlasting care and now we circle back as a community and name them again.

Jim Halsey sidled up to me after worship on a Sunday morning with a Civil War book in one hand and a hymnal in the other and said, "Padre," — he always called me 'Padre', and we all called him "Dr. Jim" — "Padre, I want to show you my favorite hymn: *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*."

I assured Jim that I'd heard of it. He nodded: "Well, I think we should sing it!"

I asked him if he meant that he and I should start singing, right then and there, in front of the coffee pot and doughnuts. The twinkle in his eye made me wonder if he was about to call my bluff.

"No, no, no."

This was Jim's church home for only a few years at the end of his life.

The very selfish part of me wishes we'd gotten to know him sooner. By the time Jim arrived here, he was already on the unmooring slide into dementia.

If you've been paying attention, you know that we try to encourage curiosity in the kids here — I tell them any chance I get that questions are holy and doubts are sacred and that a faith without struggle isn't particularly interesting to me. And so I wish we'd gotten more of Jim's innate curiosity, his ability to parse sentences in a search for meaning, his whimsy in wrestling with scripture and the Big Questions, and his appreciation for both the beauty of the melody and the secrets of the notes that went unplayed.

The wiser side of me knows that we were a place for Jim to call home when he needed us — no sooner, no later.

So I'm thinking of it this way: What a privilege it was to be the last church to call him brother, to sing with him, to pray with him, to lift up grace and hope and mercy and love with him. What a joy to know this father, husband, grandfather, teacher, doctor, friend, mentor, and beloved child of God. What a blessing to offer him a place to rest his spirit and renew his soul. Of course, we were not his last stop, but merely lodging for a longer journey that is beyond time and space. Dr. Jim, in his own Dr. Jim way, proclaimed, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord! Glory, Glory, hallelujah!"

Jim Halsey died on February 3rd. It was a Sunday.

I was at Columbia Seminary at a conference, and I was sharing a room with Pastor Emeritus Sid Burgess when I had to tell him that Momma Nell had died. Now, I knew exactly what he was going to say, because he has been talking about Nell in this way for as long as I have known him.

Sid told me that it is a feature of many smaller churches to have informal officers known as "Gatekeepers." It's an unelected position to which people tend to appoint themselves. The Gatekeepers are

in charge of maintaining the status quo and checking out any potential new folks to be sure that everything stays precisely to their liking.

Especially as she grew older, Momma Nell would have made an excellent Gatekeeper. She had the authority. She had the history. She had the knowledge.

But she also had something so much deeper: a faith that God would show up on the corner of Oxmoor and Peerless. And so she and her husband Preston were Gate-dismantlers. They worked hard at making sure anyone with the courage to enter this building would be met with welcome and that the doors would remain wide open. Truly, that welcome has become part of this congregation's DNA. When Amber and I first visited Edgewood, we got the sense that y'all wanted new people to come in and help transform this place, not to get in line and conform to it. And when I need to be reminded to foster that perspective here, it's Nell Barron who visits me.

Nell and her family were crucial in keeping this church going when it split over issues of gatekeeping, as those who couldn't abide a woman in leadership went off to start their own gated congregation. Nell and her friends took those leadership positions and ran with them in the first class of female Elders in the history of EPC. She was faithful through the lean years, and then as the church embraced a miss-a-Sunday, miss-a-change philosophy that helped it move from surviving to thriving at a time when churches our size are disappearing. Truly, without Nell and Preston, none of us would be here right now.

As Momma Nell got weaker and couldn't make it to church anymore, she still managed to know everything about everything that was going on. She'd call me to share the scoop. She'd wait patiently when I'd visit as I told her things she already knew. I asked her for church history, and she'd share it. But what she really wanted to talk about was what was new and next.

The problem with holding the gates wide open and letting people in is that they get stuck in your heart, and then your heart breaks when you lose them. Momma Nell Barron chose a broken heart over a closed gate. Her daughter, her grandson, her beloved husband, her parents, most of her siblings, many of her dear friends here at Edgewood, they all preceded her in becoming saints of the church. At her funeral I clung to the words from a fairly obscure story in the book of Genesis that the Presbyterian Women's Circle used to close their meetings:

"The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another"

Nell Barron died on February 9th. It was a Saturday.

"Why does it hurt so much?" we ask, knowing full well that the answer is, "Because it matters."

For some reason, preachers are often thrilled just to get a dad and husband in the door of the church. And then there was Mike Morgan. Mike was officially a member at Trinity UMC up the street, and that congregation loved and supported Mike and his family so wonderfully, especially this year. But he would

always show up for and hang around with his Presbyterian family because he loved his wife and his daughter so very much, and he knew that we'd always greet him enthusiastically and feed him well.

Mike taught me to never underestimate a seemingly quiet dad. Just a few months into my time as pastor here, Mike and I were cleaning up from supper on a Wednesday night, and he'd just asked me about a plumbing issue he'd heard about at the church. And then he looked to his left and his right, almost as if trying to make sure nobody else heard, and softly asked me what I thought about the concept of universalism.

He did this to me at least a dozen times over the past five years, taking a sharp turn in the middle of an otherwise mundane conversation to quietly bring up something profoundly meaningful. I never quite knew when they were coming. I think he enjoyed that. I know that I did.

Mike was one of the good guys, and he got shorted a couple of decades and that makes me angry because it's simply not fair. As he faced big scary brain surgeries this past spring, Mike would get a bit panicked if I or one of the Trinity pastors hadn't come to pray with him yet. And then, in prayer, you could see his anxiety dissipate and a warmth surround him. He squeezed hands like no other. He put his trust, in those hardest moments, in the God he knew through two churches and a life surrounded by his beloved.

Mike loved his family and his God in a way that I don't think even he could understand or express. And, because he was blessed, his God and his family love him in the same indescribable way.

It hurts because it matters. Mike matters to us – because he was one of the good guys, and because he loved us, and because we love Alice and Sarah Alice in a way we don't know how to express.

Never underestimate a dad. Well done, good and faithful servant.

Mike Morgan died on May 30th. It was a Thursday.

None of these, nor anyone else we'll name at the appointed time, were perfect.

Of course, neither was Elijah. You get the sense that he was buying into his own hype as much as he was God's. Our reading cuts off with the people being wowed. In the next verse, Elijah has the prophets of Baal slaughtered. And then he's on the run, a fearful fugitive. He wants to die. He ends up at Mount Horeb, where he's told he will meet God:

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in

his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’

Elijah, it turns out, was not the star of the show at Mount Carmel. It was God.¹

When we have a funeral — what Presbyterians call a Service of Witness to the Resurrection — we celebrate the life of the one who has died. We tell stories about them and thank God for them. But they are not the star of the show. The saints are not the stars of All Saints’ Day. Their witness, their faithfulness, and the grace they found from their God all testify to the everlasting love of a God who shows up.

Let us pray:

You only are immortal, the creator and maker of all.

We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. This you ordained when you created us, saying, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Give rest, O Christ, to your saints, where there is neither pain nor sorrow nor sighing, but life everlasting. Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, pp. 29-30