

Worship without the Bull
Sermon by The Rev. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
May 29, 2016
1 Kings 18:20-39
Luke 7:1-10

What we witness in today's lectionary from 1 Kings is quite a spectacle, even if we only witness it as readers and listeners. "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him," the prophet Elijah challenged Israel. To make their choice easier, Elijah challenges 450 prophets of Baal to see whose prayers -- Elijah's to The Lord or the 450 prophets' prayers to Baal-- will consume the bull. Of course, the prophets of Baal show no power. As they cried through the day and even tortured themselves to get Baal's attention, there was "*no voice, no answer, and no response.*" Meanwhile Elijah -- who soaks the altar over and over with water to bring the point home -- calls on God, and immediately a consuming flame sent the saturated bull up in fiery smoke.

A black-and-white reading of this text draws a line -- you follow The Lord, and you will be favored. God will bless you. Call on The Lord, and God will cause amazing things-- even things nature will not allow on its own-- to happen. Much of the covenantal theology of the Hebrew Bible follows this understanding: I will be your God, and you will be my people. The Deuteronomic code spells it out: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall not perish; you shall not live long in the land" (Deuteronomy 30:15-18a).

Call on other gods, and all bets are off. You will be humiliated, as were the 450 prophets who couldn't get the fire started in the name of Baal. Not only that, but you will set your face towards your own destruction. Ahab, who ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel for 22 years, along with his wife Jezebel, served Baal. Baal is the Canaanite god whom they believe blessed the land and the people with fertility. Ahab erected an altar and a house to Baal in Samaria, and a sacred fertility pole. Elijah the prophet sought to turn Ahab's face back toward The Lord of Israel, but Ahab continued to support the worship of other gods. The bible notes that "Ahab had done more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33b). But Ahab's gods could not burn the bull. What the reading from this morning neatly leaves out is one little verse that follows just tucked away after the lectionary text ends. 450 prophets of Baal are captured under Elijah's command, taken to the Wadi, and killed. Today, we would see such an action as a war crime.

It is easy to get the point of the story. Worship God alone, *or else*. And even though Baal may not be calling us to have sex in the fields to encourage a fruitful harvest, we each have our idols we are more comfortable worshiping than God. While my family and I live in the theater district for 2 more weeks, we only have to walk one block over to see Times Square at night, where it is as bright as day, to see that in America we certainly have our idols. And while most of us cannot extract ourselves from the idols of consumerism endemic to American culture, we have other idols too. A prayerful examination that includes a consideration of how we prioritize our time and money may reveal what we idolize more than loving God and neighbor.

But what do we do with a text that demonizes those who do not worship God? How can we, who live in a pluralistic society and are friends and neighbors with peoples of other faiths, accept a scripture that is so harsh towards those who worship other gods? Haven't we each been ones to call on God only to find "*no voice, no answer, no response*"-- the same blunt silence the prophets of Baal encountered when they called on their god?

I don't see this as a "go and do likewise" text; Edwina Gately warns, "The Bible's historical descriptions of sacred violence don't imply moral prescriptions for us today. The Bible contains many things that we rightly reject rather than imitate."ⁱ We can rightly reject the mass murder of 450 prophets while still holding to the belief, which the Ten Commandments also asserts, that we should worship God alone.

This Memorial Day weekend, many of us have listened with interest to the President's journey to Japan, where he visited Hiroshima's Memorial Peace Park, site of the nuclear bomb that flattened a city and killed 140,000 civilians. People wondered, "Would he apologize? Should he? Does he even have the right to apologize?" Japan made it clear that its government made no official expectation of apology. No doubt that the Japanese military was guilty of war atrocities across China, Korea, and The Philippines. Some scholars argue that the 200,000 lives lost in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki hastened the ending of a war that in the long run would have killed many more people. Yet no matter what angle you look at it, *war is a trauma on humanity and causes suffering and loss of life by people who are either innocent or believe they are justified in their actions*. Obama's visit tried to honor the humanity of the lives lost or changed forever. He also sought to warn us about our own capacity for violence: "our thoughts, our imagination, our language, our tool-making, our ability to set ourselves apart from nature and bend it to our will-- those very things also give us the capacity for unmatched destruction," he warned.

President Obama's visit was an important one; however, it has not slipped my notice that Obama's administration has done the weakest job of any post-Cold War president of reducing America's stockpile of nuclear weapons. You see, our values of safety and security also harbor their own idols of weaponry as we seek to protect "our way of life" and in doing so leave vulnerable the safety and security of the people whom we fear.

Choose the Lord, or choose Baal. We hope we are choosing God's way. But when we become stubborn in our certainty that God is only on our side, we risk becoming the enemy we fear.

In his encounter with the Roman Centurion, Jesus held this complexity. This encounter happens in Luke's gospel, which is a bit surprising because Luke's gospel challenges empire with its emphasis on the poor and oppressed. But here we find a Roman soldier-- the enemy to Jews in occupied Palestine-- who seeks Jesus out. We can already tell this man does not follow the script of the agent of an oppressive regime; the Jewish elders note that "he loves our people, and it is he who built a synagogue for us." The centurion has used his privilege to the benefit of the Jews, who were on the margins of society. The centurion also has a slave-- another marker of his privilege. We do not know the nature of their relationship or why the slave matters to the centurion so much. Does the slave's value to the soldier rest only in his economic worth? Or does the slave's value rest in a more tender relationship of the heart shared between the two? It is not clear from the scripture whether Jesus responds to the faith of the slave, or to the faith of the soldier, but regardless the soldier goes back home to find the slave in good health.

Most of us who engage with Jesus today, like the Roman centurion, also hold many layers of privilege and vulnerability. Our privilege can become an idol that we use as a barrier for Jesus to really reach us and move us in those places where we feel most vulnerable.

Elijah chose a bull as the symbol of what would be burned before God to show who was a truer prophet. Moses found the Hebrew people had fashioned a bull out of gold in the wilderness while they awaited Moses' return from talking to God on Mt. Horeb. Through Aaron, they had collected all their gold jewelry and melted it down into this cast idol.

Today, we do not practice ritual animal sacrifice to honor God or to prove God's power. The prophet Amos spoke these words of God: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon...But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24).

When we worship, we must not let any bull come between us and God. These bulls can be idols we place before God. They can be our substitute comforts when we first try to ask God for what we want or need but hear "*no voice, no answer, no response.*" Worship without bull lets us unmask privilege as we reveal our vulnerabilities before Jesus, and allows him to do transformative work not only on our souls but on our social order. Worship without bull allows us to ask thoughtful questions of the bible and of the faith when it endorses violence, and calls us to look always to Jesus for the ways of peace.

ⁱ Edwina Gately, “If The Lord is God, Follow Him” Elijah and the Prophets of Baal” in *Journey with Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church* June 2, 2013