

## Power on Mt. Carmel

1 Kings 18: 17 – 39

June 20, 2010

### I. Introduction

A. On the whole, says Annie Dillard in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

1. I do not find Christians...sufficiently sensible of [the] conditions [in which we live

A. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we...invoke [when we pray]

1. Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it

A. If we do, Annie suggests, when we gather on Sunday morning

1. ...we should all be wearing crash helmets

a. Ushers should [hand out] life preservers and signal flares

2. And there should be seatbelts furnished to strap ourselves into the pews

a. For who knows how Almighty God may choose to reveal his power to (or in) us

A. In the story that we have heard this morning, I don't think there is any doubt

1. That the people of Israel recognized God's power, up there on Mount Carmel

a. Some of them may have been wishing for crash helmets and signal flares

A. But simply seeing this awesome display of greatness and power

1. Did those people very little good, just as hearing about it does us no good

a. Unless we are convinced in our hearts as well as our minds

(1) That Jehovah God is the only true God

2. Unless we are willing to quit "straddling the fence" as Elijah described the Israelites

a. Proclaiming our loyalty to God when we come to worship on Sunday mornings

(1) And our dependence on worldly wealth and power the rest of the week

A. I wonder how we/I would respond if Elijah were here this morning

1. Challenging us with the words – If Jehovah is God, then follow him

a. But if Baal, or any other god of this world, is god of my life, then follow him

A. Would we have anything to say; or would we, like the Israelites, be silent

1. Have we seen God at work in our lives, or in the world around us

a. So that we are absolutely, unshakably, convinced of his power and might

A. Or perhaps we should be praying for God to send down fire from heaven

1. If not to burn up our sacrifice and the stones of our altar

a. At least to set our hearts on fire with an unquenchable passion and love

(1) For God, for each other, and for the people that we will meet this week

- A. A fire that cleanses and purifies our lives from divided loyalties
  - 1. So that we can obey and serve the one true God – Amen?
- II. We are at the second of our series of messages on the theme – Meet God on the Mountain
  - A. The theme that was the focus of the Bible School lessons this past week
    - 1. We will be following those lesson texts for the next several Sundays
      - a. Passages of scripture that in some way or another include mountains
  - A. And before we dig into this scripture a bit deeper
    - 1. I just want to say thank you again to everyone who helped in any way
      - a. To plan, prepare for, and support the work of the Bible School
  - A. There is perhaps no mission field so open for ministry in this community
    - 1. Than teaching children and young people to know and love our great God
  - A. And the interaction with people in the community that takes place during Bible School
    - 1. Is one of the most powerful witnesses we can have of God’s love
      - a. Tearing down barriers that sometimes separate and divide us
        - (1) And building bridges of understanding and common respect for each other
    - 2. That, to me, is what the kingdom of heaven on earth is all about
  - A. My hope would be that the model of reaching out/interacting with the people around us
    - 1. That we see at Bible School could be put into practice with other people
      - a. In our community throughout the year as well (this ad paid for by...)
- III. I would like to preach from this particular text during the late summer or early fall
  - A. When the weather tends to be a little hotter and dryer
    - 1. Because that’s the context or setting for the showdown on Mt. Carmel
  - A. It’s hard for us to imagine, especially with all the rain we’ve had in the last few weeks
    - 1. What it would be like to be in a drought for three and a half years
      - a. But those were the conditions in the land of Israel at this time
  - A. We could look the verses at the end of Ch. 16 to see some examples
    - 1. Of the terrible evil that was being practiced by King Ahab
      - a. That led the prophet Elijah to tell the king that it would not rain again
        - (1) Until God spoke the word
  - A. Elijah was on the run from the king throughout those years of drought
    - 1. Because, of course, the king put the blame on Elijah for causing the rain to stop
  - A. Then, at the beginning of Ch. 18, we hear God telling Elijah to go speak to the king again
    - 1. To give him the word that it would rain soon

- A. We're not told that God gave Elijah instructions about the showdown on the mountain
  - 1. But I can't imagine even the great prophet would have dared to do such a thing
    - a. Without pretty specific directions that he knew were from God
- A. And so, we find Elijah confronting the king with the message
  - 1. That it was not the prophet who was the cause of the drought
    - a. But it was the king himself, and his rejection of Jehovah, and worship of the Baals
  - 2. As I understand it, Baal was a generic term that included a number of deities
    - a. Asherah, who is mentioned in particular as the object of the queen's devotion
      - (1) Was a fertility goddess
  - 3. While the chief god was supposedly connected with the sun
    - a. And therefore also the god who controlled fire, wind and rain
- A. So it made perfect sense when Elijah proposed the ultimate test of power
  - 1. A sacrifice offered up to the Baals by the multitude of the king's personal prophets
    - a. And another offered to Jehovah by one prophet of God
- A. Were the Baals really able to produce fire from heaven to burn up the sacrifice
  - 1. And in turn, could they provide rain to end the suffering from the drought
- A. Or would the God of their ancestors – Abraham, Moses and King David among others
  - 1. Prove his power by accomplishing such a difficult task
- A. We might wonder why King Ahab even accepted Elijah's challenge
  - 1. Did he really believe that the Baals could bring down fire from heaven
    - a. That might seem really ridiculous to us today
- A. But let me share with you some of the thinking of a number of Bible scholars
  - 1. And historians who have studied the culture of that day and time
- A. Scripture presents a picture of false prophets as having a great deal of power
  - 1. Able to duplicate many of the miracles Moses performed in the plagues in Egypt
    - a. Using a combination of deception and cunning to persuade people
  - 2. And sometimes using their knowledge of natural events that could be predicted
    - a. In order to make it look like their gods had supernatural power
      - (1) And in turn, elevating themselves in the eyes of the rest of the people
- A. One of the things it is believed that the prophets of Baal liked to do
  - 1. Was to build an altar with a concealed fire pit underneath
    - a. Then they could place the wood and the sacrifice on the altar
      - (1) Pour a bit of oil over it that would run down to the fire pit below

- b. And presto, abracadabra, the fire would whoosh up through the altar
      - (1) And burn up the wood and the sacrifice
  - 2. Of course the prophets of Baal would have called on their gods to produce the fire
    - a. And in the sight of the people, it appeared that they had done just that
- A. So, as strange as it might seem to us, it is possible that King Ahab
  - 1. Actually believed that the Baals were capable of meeting Elijah's challenge
- A. And once the king committed to the showdown, there was no way to back out
  - 1. The prophets of Baal could only hope that their gods would come through for them
    - a. Almost makes you feel sorry for them, doesn't it – almost...
- A. It's another example of the old saying – you can fool some of the people all of the time
  - 1. And all of the people some of the time – but you can't fool God any time
    - a. And now their deception was about to be revealed
  - 2. Be sure your sin will find you out, the verse many of us heard repeatedly
    - a. Was about to come true for these men who had lived so comfortably
      - (1) By fooling people into believing they had a special connection with god
- A. Of course, we know that the Baals were not able to create fire or send fire from heaven
  - 1. Although it would be interesting to know what struggle may have been going on
    - a. Between the spiritual forces of good and evil in the heavenly realm
      - (1) To prevent Satan from responding to the prayers of the false prophets
  - 2. Imagine how the story would have turned out differently
    - a. If the devil had been allowed to intervene in some way
- A. I don't understand a lot about spiritual warfare, but I can't help but believe
  - 1. That the battle there was even greater than the physical manifestation
    - a. That took place on the mountain
- A. And I am in awe of the faith that Elijah demonstrated in this situation
  - 1. Giving every advantage, it would seem, to the prophets of Baal
    - a. And then taunting them with words about their god being asleep
  - 2. Or on a journey, or as some scholars interpret the words, going to the bathroom
- A. The description of those prophets, dancing around their altar, cutting themselves
  - 1. Trying to persuade their gods to send down fire
    - a. Has to be among the most heart-wrenching stories in the Bible
- A. How could they have been so deluded? So fanatical in the false ideas about god?
  - 1. And yet, are they really so much different than any of us

- A. Or, perhaps we should ask the question this way
  - 1. Are we capable of being just as foolish in our unbelief at times
- A. For unless we are convinced in our own minds that God is the only true God
  - 1. And that God is big enough and powerful enough to control our lives/world
    - a. Then it becomes imperative that we find someone or something else to trust
  - 2. And we may go to great lengths at times to convince ourselves and everyone else
    - a. That our gods of wealth and power are able to protect and provide for us
- A. But if we believe, as Elijah obviously did, that God is greater and more powerful
  - 1. Than any other force on earth, then we can be assured
    - a. That when God says to do something, the outcome is already determined
- A. As Corrie ten Boom has been quoted as saying –
  - 1. Don't bother to give God instructions; just report for duty.
    - a. Elijah reported for duty on Mount Carmel that day, and God did all the rest
- A. In light of the deception practiced by the false prophets of Baal
  - 1. We can perhaps understand better why it was important
    - a. For the people to see Elijah build his altar, with the symbolic twelve stones
  - 2. And soaking everything with water ensured that there was no trickery involved
    - a. With concealed fire pits or hot coals that could be fanned into flame
- A. It might even be notable that the order in which the fire consumed the sacrifice
  - 1. Was from the top down – the sacrifice itself, then the wood, the stones of the altar
    - a. And then even the water that stood in the trench around the altar
  - 2. That was no ordinary fire that God sent down from heaven
- A. And it must have been totally convincing because King Ahab doesn't interfere
  - 1. When Elijah pronounces God's judgment on the 450 false prophets of Baal
    - a. And orders them all put to death
- A. And yet, the greatest test is still to come – could God also send down rain?
  - 1. We didn't read that part of the story, but perhaps you know it already
- A. Elijah follows the amazing display of God's power over fire
  - 1. By going off by himself to pray for rain
    - a. The NT writers used this as an example of faithfulness in prayer
  - 2. Asking God to do what seems improbable or even impossible to us
    - a. To send rain when there had been no rain for three and a half years
- A. As the Apostle James puts it – the fervent prayer of a righteous person is effective

1. Not in twisting God's arm to do what is being requested
    - a. But in placing ourselves in line with God's desire
      - (1) And asking for those things that will bring honor and glory to God
  - A. God answered Elijah's prayer that day, the rains came, the drought was ended
    1. And God received the credit, all because of Elijah's faithfulness
- IV. So often today, when we hear people talk about God's power and might
- A. The focus is on what God can do for me, or someone that we care about
    1. It is not wrong to ask God to provide for us or care for us
      - a. But how often do we pray for God's power to be displayed
        - (1) In our lives or through our actions
      - b. Simply to honor God and persuade others of the greatness of God
  - A. I know that I sometimes feel inadequate to even reach out to people
    1. Or confront the evil that is just as prevalent now as it was in Elijah's day
      - a. Because I live in the world of the natural, the ordinary, the explainable
  - A. As author Vance Havner has said - We leave no room for God to do the exceeding abundant thing above all that we can ask or think.
    1. God has not become less powerful in our world today
      - a. Than he was when he sent down fire on the mountain and burned up
        - (1) The sacrifice and the altar Elijah built
  - A. So what does that say about us?
    1. Is anyone feeling the need for a crash helmet or a seatbelt this morning?