

Contest on Mt. Carmel

TEXT: 1 Kings 18:20-39

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on February 26, 2023

The church season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and goes for 40 days. It's a time when we remember that life is hard, that we inhabit mortal bodies, and that the way to God embodied in the life of Jesus involves learning to give things up rather than to collect and hoard. It's a time when we remember that cleaning the pipes of our soul once a year is the only way Easter joy will be able to wash through us and not just over and past us.

Lent lasts for 40 days because 40 is a symbolic number in the Bible. Ancient Hebrew did not have separate characters for numbers. The letters of the alphabet also served as numbers. So numerology and the Bible, especially the Old Testament, are tightly tied and have been for millennia, including for the people who wrote the text. Forty almost never means forty. Same with twelve and its multiples, seven, three, and a host of others.

The number 40 represents a period of extreme distress, difficulty, and in some cases death. In the story of Noah, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Every living thing except for those on the ark died; and it couldn't have been a picnic on the boat, either. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years; a whole generation died off before entering the Promised Land. At the start of his ministry, Jesus goes out into the wilderness for a forty-day fast, where Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us he endured harsh temptations by Satan.

Those are the kinds of themes we focus on during the 40 days of Lent; not because they're fun, but because those kinds of periods are something we all go through—both individually and collectively—throughout our lives. But the other thing about biblical events that contain the dreaded 40 is that they also signify transformational new beginnings, once the period is over. Lent precedes Easter both on the church calendar and symbolically. Noah became a new Adam; the Israelites did enter the Promised Land and became a nation. The transformative ministry of Jesus began.

Another thing those biblical stories of difficulty have in common is mountains. The ark comes to rest on Mt. Ararat, in modern-day Turkey. The climax of the Israelite sojourn in the wilderness happens with the receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. The area around the Dead Sea in Israel, where Jesus spent his forty-day fast, is mountainous terrain and Satan specifically takes him up to one of those peaks. In all three cases, a mountain marked the transition from the time of difficulty to a transformed future.

The first mountain I ever climbed was Mt. Chocorua in New Hampshire. My great grandparents were the innkeepers for the old Chocorua Inn, and my grandfather was born in the mountain's shadow, so it's a sacred mountain of sorts for the Robertson side of my family. The mountain adorns many paintings and souvenirs because, at 3,490 ft., it's low enough that you can almost always see its distinctive, rocky peak. It's one of the most photographed peaks in the world.

Although my parents had been up the mountain many times, we climbed as a family for the first time when I was something like eleven or twelve years old and my brother, Rob, two years younger than that. When we got to the rocky part near the summit, I came to understand something that I had never considered before.

"Where's the path?" I asked. "How do we get up there?" I could see the danger all around me. I was used to National and State Parks where dangerous places had handrails and stairs and a marked path or boardwalk for those visiting to be safe around hot springs or waterfalls or rocky ledges.

There was nothing like that at the top of Mt. Chocorua. There were gaps in the rocks where you had to jump; and perilous drops if you missed. In other places you had to hang on and climb. It was there in that moment that I realized, for the first time ever, “I could die up here!”

Facing that dangerous peak on Mt. Chocorua marked a critical decision point in my young life. I was scared. Take the risk to gain the view from the top? Or stay safe, skip the lessons only offered at the summits of mountains, and never learn my own capabilities. Had I been alone, I likely would have just hiked back down. But with my family to help, both emotionally and physically, I mustered the courage to go all the way up.

And so, during Lent this year, we will ask with the Psalmist in Psalm 121, “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come?” And we will go to the mountains of the Bible to find out.

Today and next week we will look at two different mountains that serve as touch points for the same story about the prophet Elijah. Today, we begin on top of Mt. Carmel, a limestone mountain in northern Israel, where Elijah stages a contest with the prophets of Baal. Carmel is actually a whole mountain range, but the northeastern face forms a steep ridge. Rising to 1791 ft., it creates a natural barrier in the landscape, just as the Jezreel valley forms a passageway below. In other words, it’s a great stage for pyrotechnics.

This story is 100% staged spectacle, so let’s meet the main characters in the drama. Elijah is a prophet—certainly the most colorful of the Biblical prophets—and he lived in the 9th century BCE. At that time, Israel was divided into a northern and southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was called Israel and the southern kingdom was called Judah. Elijah lived and brought the Word of God to Israel in the north.

There are lots of miracles attributed to Elijah in the Bible and, instead of dying like all the other prophets, the story goes that a fiery chariot came down to get him and Elijah simply rode off into heaven in the chariot. The African-American spiritual “Swing low, Sweet Chariot” is a reference to Elijah’s final, fiery ride.

Because of all that, the expectation grew that he would come back to usher in the final age of the world. That’s why Jews have always prepared a cup and left a chair for Elijah at Passover...this year just might be the year of his coming. Many in the first century thought Jesus was Elijah returned. Elijah is a big deal in the Bible and a prominent figure for Jews and Christians alike.

During much of Elijah’s life, he fought with the rulers of Israel, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They remain offscreen but influential in this story. I should add here that although the 9th century BCE is a long time ago, there are records outside the Bible of this period. These are not mythical figures, like you might get in some of the Bible’s earliest stories from the oral traditions of pre-history. There are secular accounts of the kings and queens of this period, and in the secular accounts, King Ahab was a very successful ruler, making the northern kingdom of Israel the envy of its neighbors.

The Bible, however, is not a fan of either King Ahab or Queen Jezebel, because they ruled Israel but worshipped other gods. Those other gods were the head of the local pantheon...Baal and his consort, Asherah. The Hebrew word Baal simply means “Lord,” and sometimes the Bible lumps the entire Canaanite pantheon under the name of Baal, calling them all “the Baals.”

Elijah’s name in Hebrew means “Yahweh is God,” and that was exactly his message to Ahab and Jezebel. He yelled and fumed and did all he could to bring Ahab and Jezebel to ruin because they were leading the people away from the one true God and into idolatry. The battle went on for years. The crowning moment comes here, on Mt. Carmel, where Elijah finally calls the bluff of the prophets of Baal. Here he intends to prove, once and

for all, on a plateau over 1700 feet above the valley for all to see, that his God is the real God and Baal is a fraud.

You think you are worshipping a real god? Can your god send fire to consume the sacrifices on your altar? Mine can. Let's see what you've got.

You've heard the story...it seems ready for Cecil B. DeMille...hundreds of prophets of Baal dancing wildly around their altar...hour after hour, all day long....crying out to Baal to send the fire, mutilating themselves to show their sincerity. And while they do that, Elijah just sits back and laughs at them. The account in Scripture is actually cleaned up a bit in the English translations. I had to translate this passage for a Hebrew exam and you'll have to trust me that Elijah's taunts are a bit ruder than English readers would be led to believe.

Then Elijah's turn comes and he spices it up for the cameras. Just bringing down fire is too easy...he's got to make the wood and the sacrifice un-burnable by pouring so much water on it that the excess water fills a trench he has dug around the outside. The origins of Reality TV right here in the Bible.

Once the stage is set, Elijah calls on God and gets instant results. Kablaam...fire falls from heaven. It burns up the sacrifice, and the wood, and the rocks, and the dirt, and even the water in the trench. Seems to me that God had as much fun with this as Elijah did.

But I can't imagine that God approved of how Elijah handled his victory, which is described in the verse immediately following what I read earlier. Instead of shaking hands all 'round, Elijah tells the crowd gathered to watch to round up all the prophets of Baal. He then takes them down to the dry riverbed below, and slaughters them.

God doesn't tell him to do that, and it wasn't an out-of-control mob acting on their own. Elijah tells the crowd to grab them, and it is an interesting commentary on what we appreciate as human beings that if you go to Mt. Carmel today, you can see a statue of Elijah, sword drawn, slaughtering the prophets of Baal. Not fire falling on the altar; it's not God's power, but Elijah's killing that is glorified at the site. It's the act that will pave the way for the mountain we will climb with Elijah next week.

The contest here on Mt. Carmel gives us a very wide picture of human nature—our love of spectacle, our desire to eliminate those who see things differently, and our bent toward violence in achieving that end.

I think, however, that the biggest challenge this story offers to us is the root challenge of which altar we will claim for ourselves. When Moses turns the leadership of the Israelites over to Joshua, Joshua says to them, "Choose you this day whom you will serve." It's one of the most basic and universal human choices. We like to think that because we come to church and call ourselves Christians that we will automatically find ourselves at God's altar with Elijah. We would never worship a false god...how silly. And yet we do it all the time.

There are too many examples to name, so I'll just go with one that is very popular to us in the United States and especially here in New England. We, far more than other cultures and locations, dance around the altar of self-sufficiency. We deny ourselves, discipline ourselves, and exhaust ourselves, demanding that we be able to fix our problems without outside help until we collapse from the effort. We encourage each other with "*You* can do it!" not with "*We* can do it!"

The idea that only the weak and undeserving need help has been so deep in our psyche for so long that we have built it into our social systems, shaming and blaming those who struggle, cutting aid, and keeping the bottom tier of wages so low that no amount of labor can keep food on the table or take advantage of life-saving healthcare. Whose altar is that?

Self-sufficiency is not an attitude found in indigenous cultures. So colonizers, here and around the globe, “civilized” them, took their resources for our own gain, obliterated any remnants of their culture and language, and then literally made them pay the price for that which they once had and shared for free. Whose altar is that?

Our hypocrisy in this is stunning. None of us is self-sufficient. But we can’t seem to face that fact. Instead, we created systems that force people to pay for the help they need to live. Or, if you’re powerful enough, you can force others to work, either for free or for the smallest wage the law will allow. “I have done it,” too often means “I have the means or power to order it done by others.” Whose altar is that?

Further, even those who benefit from that system in terms of daily comfort, are harming themselves spiritually. When we can’t admit our dependency on others, we can’t truly recognize our dependence on God. At best we come to see God as someone to order around or pay to give us what we want. Surely, we must *earn* God’s favor somehow. God would never give anything *free* to those who don’t deserve it. To admit otherwise would be to upset the system on which our leisure depends. Whose altar is that?

But there is another choice, another altar. No matter how impossible it seems, no matter how wet the wood, God’s fire can still blaze in our lives the moment we call. The catch is, we have to be willing to call and we have to be at the right altar. At the altar of the true God, as the prophet Isaiah says, those without money can still come and eat. Elijah shows us that God responds at that altar, even if we’ve gone out of our way to make God’s response more difficult. Every obstacle we put in God’s way will be shriveled with holy fire in a nanosecond.

But you know what God didn’t shrivel with holy fire in a nanosecond? The opposing party. God left those at the wrong altar alone. For God’s part, it would be on them to recognize that what they did wasn’t working. Elijah, however, had his own ideas and slaughtered them all.

We can’t necessarily trust the Bible’s numerical claim of 450 dead, but it was enough that Queen Jezebel heard about it and came after Elijah with her own blazing fire. He had to run for his life. That flight landed him on a different mountain, which we’ll visit next week. Amen.