

November 5th: Reveal

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Today’s text is a rich one, so let’s pray together before we begin.

Powerful God,

In our daily lives, we are constantly confronted by the siren song of idols and false prophets—we struggle to distinguish the truth from the lies and misinformation that surrounds us. We are often led astray by loud voices and deceptive messages, and we forget your commandment to worship you alone. But deep down we know that these golden calves do not bring us the peace and

fulfillment that we desire—we know that only you can provide the hope that we are longing for. Speak to us today, reveal yourself to us so that we might be reminded of where true power and true wisdom is found. Reorient our hearts towards you, so that we might serve you and serve your people. Reignite our devotion to you this week, we pray. Amen.

Today we once again find ourselves in the Old Testament, specifically in the historical book of 1 Kings. At this point in our biblical story, the once united monarchy has been split into separate northern and southern kingdoms—and the northern kingdom of Israel is struggling under the leadership of King Ahab, the 8th King of Israel after the Divided Monarchy began. Ahab and his wife Jezebel were devoted followers of the Canaanite deity Baal—the God of storms and fertility, and have devoted their reign to establishing Baal as the central focus of worship for the entire nation. They built a new altar and temple in the capital city of Samaria, and have driven out or killed almost all of the remaining priests and prophets of Yahweh. But these changes have come with a great spiritual cost, as the nation of Israel is now dealing with a three year long drought that has devastated the food supply and local economy. The land is barren, the soil drier than dust, the wells empty, the crops that had been stored for such a famine have all been consumed. The people of Israel are desperate for answers and desperate for rain.

When we reach chapter 18, we learn that one of the only remaining prophets of Yahweh, the famous prophet Elijah, has come to confront this dire situation and challenge King Ahab. Right before our passage begins, Elijah issues a message to Ahab, calling him to bring all the people of Israel and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal to the top of Mount Carmel. At the top of the mountain, Elijah has proposed a contest between the two gods—both Yahweh and Baal will have an opportunity to demonstrate their power to the nation. If you've heard this story before, you know that Elijah and the prophets of Baal set up this contest with sacrifices of bulls on their respective altars, with each god called upon to send down fire to light these sacrifices. If the idea of asking for fire in the middle of a drought seems like a questionable plan to you, you're probably not alone. I don't think Smokey the

Bear would be very happy with this concept of lighting things on fire while the land around them is arid and super flammable, but Elijah seems to have a solid strategy behind this test.

The priests of Baal are given an opportunity to pray and prophesy, but as the day goes on, their altar remains untouched with no sign of fire in sight. Like the fields around them, their altar is barren, with no response from their god. Elijah even taunts them, saying, “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” So the priests of Baal continue their dancing and rituals, but still nothing happens.

So then it comes to be Elijah’s turn—his opportunity to demonstrate Yahweh’s power. In verses 30 through 33, we read, “Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.”

This process of filling jars and dumping water on the sacrifices continues for a second and third time, until the entire trench around the altar is full of precious water. And then Elijah offers this prayer: “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 and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

And then, verse 38 tells us that Elijah was successful. Our text records, “Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.”

But what really interests me about this passage is the intention behind Elijah's test. Of course, this contest between Baal and Yahweh reveals to King Ahab that his chosen deity is a false god, with no power to change the desperate situation of the nation. Of course, this confrontation with the priest of Baal reveals that their work and their prayers are empty, and worth nothing to the people who are in need of water and food. Of course the events of this passage reveal that Elijah has been right all along. Of course, this arrival of fire on Elijah's sacrifice reveals that Yahweh is in fact the true God of Israel, and the only God with the ability to bring about a resolution to this famine.

But that's not all. And I think that's not even the most important revelation that is recorded in this story. Let's rewind a little bit to verse 21—the moment when Elijah comes before the people of Israel and asks them, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

At this point, we can see that the purpose is directed towards the people of Israel, not its monarchs. More than anything, I think this contest is intended to reveal the hearts of the Israelites. I think Elijah's challenge to the priests of Baal is intended to reveal the loyalties of Israel. I think this battle of sacrifices is intended to reveal the true allegiance of God's people.

Here's the best part about this story: Elijah's plan works!

After Elijah's altar is consumed with fire, we hear that the crowd that was gathered falls prostrate on the ground in front of the altar and cries out, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!” This is what Elijah has wanted to achieve, this is the resolution that Elijah has hoped would occur. The people make a choice and their loyalty is clear.

And at the very end of this chapter, our text says that the sky grew black with clouds, and a heavy rain began to fall on the land of Israel. The renewed devotion of God's family has brought about God's blessing.

This is a happy ending for Elijah and for the people who have demonstrated their allegiance to Yahweh, but not so much for everyone else. These priests of Baal are driven into the valley, where all of them are put to death, and Ahab is forced to retreat and hide from Elijah and his new followers. Their character and loyalty were also revealed during these events, and unfortunately, it was found severely lacking.

So as we turn to our modern application, our verb for today is: to reveal.

As you prepare yourself for the situations of your own unique lives, and the tasks that await you this week—I want to challenge you to think about how your individual actions and choices reveal your own loyalties or reveal your own priorities. I want you to think about the decisions you make, or the ways in which you act, because I think that each of those things can reveal the values that are at the heart of our lives.

Unfortunately, just like ancient Israel, I think we have no shortage of false gods in our culture today. They might not be a golden statue or the god of a rival religion, but there are ideas and concepts that drive our behavior that can be contrary to or competitive with our loyalty to our faith. There are things that we worship, both intentionally and unintentionally, that distract us from our worship of God or our life of faith. If Elijah were here with us today, I believe there's a fair number of idols that he would call out and name as problematic. I believe that he could probably identify many things that we value more than we should. I imagine him telling us that we idolize fame and celebrities, we idolize money and financial abundance, we idolize appearances and keeping up with the Joneses, and we idolize power of all types.

We worship these things and look to these idols hoping that they will bring us the life that we desire—we hope that success or influence or the envy of our friends, or an unlimited bank account will bring us the security and connection we seek. We hope that these items we collect, or the resources that

we hoard will be enough to soothe our anxieties about the future or reassure us that we are worthy of love. But the truth is that none of that is true. None of these idols that we worship offer us the wholeness and peace that we crave. They only leave us empty, like the empty altar of the priests of Baal.

And so I think that this text confronts us and asks us to choose. I think it asks us to consider that perhaps we are a little bit like the Israelites who have gone astray, and to recommit our hearts just like they did.

So you reflect on this text, you might ask yourself: What is being revealed in me this week? What is being revealed by my actions? What loyalty or lack of loyalty is being revealed by my choices? What idols am I holding onto that keep me from loving God and serving my neighbors as I should? What am I worshiping that is getting in the way of my faithfulness?

And then, when you encounter the presence of God, or the beauty of creation, or the power of the Holy Spirit, or when you receive an answered prayer, or the grace of a friend, or the mercy of an enemy, I hope you too will respond with shouts of joy and celebration. I hope you too will respond to God's revelation with wonder and reverence.

Amen.