

The Church of Zarephath
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
August 29, 2021 – PM Service
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1 Kings 17:1-16

This is a good text for a church living through a culture war. This is a good Bible passage for a church living in a time when people are fighting for control of a culture and that fight is expressed in religious terms. That's what we are going through right now. There's no question about that, and I'm not even going to spend time explaining how that's so. I think we all know that it's so. During the reign of Ahab, the people of God found themselves in the midst of a bloody culture war. And I think it's interesting to watch what God does and how he shapes his people and leads his church through that time of crisis. That's what I want to look at tonight.

Let me be clear from the start (in case it's not clear during the preaching of the sermon) when I say that there's a culture war in Ahab's time and we can learn from watching what God does, I'm not trying to say that Ahab is like some modern figure in our culture war. I'm not suggesting that Ahab is like Biden. Or that Ahab is like Trump. I'm saying that just like we see today, there was turmoil in Israel, a conflict where religion and politics were all rolled up together and we can learn by watching how God works in his people during this crisis.

The roots of Israel's trouble went back years. We are in the time of the divided kingdom. Israel is the kingdom of the 10 northern tribes and that's where Ahab reigns. Things were already pretty messy in the northern kingdom. New kings had come to power through blood and violence. When they came to power they would slaughter the entire family of their predecessor – men, women, children, babies. Ahab made a bad thing worse. He was every bit as violent as the others and on top of that he was a fanatical Baal worshipper. He married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, and together they pushed Baal worship all over the kingdom. Ahab actually set up an altar to Baal in the temple of the Lord.

So Ahab starts the conflict, and God responds. God declares war on Baal. In chapter one he brings punishment upon Israel for their idolatry, and the punishment he brings is a direct slap in Baal's face. Do you remember what Baal is the god of? Baal is the god of the storms. People prayed to him for rain and fruitful crops. So when Elijah tells Ahab that there will be no more rain in the land, it's a direct rebuke of Baal's supposed powers. It's an object lesson. It's a visual aid which says to everyone, Baal is nothing.

Ahab and Jezebel are furious with what God is doing and they are furious with Elijah, the Lord's messenger. They declare war on the people of the Lord. Jezebel starts killing the prophets of the Lord, forcing the prophets to hide in caves. Ahab makes Elijah public enemy number one. He puts up posters all over his kingdom and the neighboring kingdoms – "Elijah. Wanted Dead or Alive." So there is a life and death struggle for the soul of Israel. It's Ahab and the Baal people on one side, and it's Elijah and the people of the Lord on the other.

The way the two sides fight is very different. Ahab engages in the culture war by going big. He musters all his influence. He builds a big army. He sends out proclamations to neighboring countries. He musters all the resources of state to find and kill Elijah. Ahab also tries to cloak himself in the power of religion. He surrounds himself with court prophets. What are court prophets? They are religious leaders whom kings and lead politicians used to give their rule religious sanction. They are prophets and priests who baptize the king's policies and whims with the blessing of God. Throughout history political leaders have understood that when you announce a war or a new policy initiative, it always helps to have a priest standing beside you nodding his head. It makes you seem like you are on the side of the angels. Ahab is a big fan of court prophets. He has prophets of Baal on his payroll. 450 of them according to 1 Kings 18. They are the ones who meet Elijah on mount Carmel. But read a little further and you realize that Ahab wants to broaden his political base. Ahab also has prophets of the Lord on his payroll – at least prophets who claim to speak for the Lord. In 1 Kings 22, we read how Ahab is deciding about whether or not to go to war against Aram and he calls in 400 prophets – yes men, all of them – who say "go into Battle and the Lord will deliver Aram into your hands!"

Ahab goes big. He musters religious power, military power and cultural power against the people of the Lord.

How does the Lord retaliate? Does the Lord go big? Does the Lord raise up an army of chariots? Does the Lord raise up people in all the cultural institutions? Does the Lord cause the people of the Lord to rise up in

revolt against Ahab's rule? No, the Lord goes in the opposite direction. The Lord goes small. Ladies and gentleman in this corner we have Ahab with his soldiers and his generals and his court prophets, and in the other corner we have the church of God: a refugee prophet, a poor widow, and her sickly son. Ahab is armed with chariots and armor and sharp swords. God's people have a jar of flour, a flask of oil that is $\frac{3}{4}$ empty and a bundle of sticks. The conflict starts and Ahab goes big, the conflict starts and God goes small. God begins his war against Baal and Ahab by moving Elijah to a place of weakness. He strips Elijah of all his cultural power.

Can we just reflect on how hard this must have been for Elijah? He was a man of influence. He was a man with lots of cultural power. He was the leading dissident of his day - the leader of the opposition. When Elijah spoke, people listened. If Ahab's time were like ours, Elijah would be the guy the media would go to if they wanted a quote on what the people of God thought about the king's policies. He would have a million followers on twitter and a popular podcast. He would have been a thought leader. But when the time comes to confront Ahab, Elijah is stripped of all that influence and all that power. And God is the one who strips him. God sends him into obscurity and makes him a refugee in a widow's house.

Why does God do that? Why does God declare war on Baal and then turn around and strip his greatest champion of his influence and his power? I want to suggest two reasons why God might do this. First, God is preparing Elijah for the future. When you are a strong intelligent person, with superior communication skills and good connections, you learn to lean on those powers. Elijah has used his sharp mind to win people over and discern the truth. Elijah has used his speaking gifts to confront kings and rally his people. Elijah has used his prophetic connections to influence people all over Israel. He's grown very attached to his tools and, like all accomplished people, he's probably thinks that his effectiveness **DEPENDS** on those tools - his connections, his influence, his preaching gifts.

To prepare Elijah for the struggle ahead, God strips him of all those things so that he may know where his help comes from. In the widow's house, Elijah has no connections - his congregation is a widow and a sickly child. He has no social power. He has no food. He has no water. All he has is the promise of God. Every morning he gets up with nothing in his hands, turns his face to heaven, he lifts his hands to heaven and says, "Please Lord. Please. Give us this day our daily bread." And every day there's enough for him and his little household. How long did Elijah live in this state of utter dependence? Weeks? Months? Years? It was long enough so that he knew that he was completely in the care and embrace of God.

My guess is that Elijah would need that knowledge. In the days to come he would have to take on the prophets of Baal and the wrath of Jezebel and the injustice of Ahab. In the days to come he would be doing battle against the forces of evil and in those places he would need to know the true source of his hope. What is this like? It's like learning to swim. If you don't know how to swim, and you watch other people swim, if you watch Olympic swimmers zip up and down the pool at great speed, you get the impression that it's the strength of their arms and the skill of their stroke and the intensity of their effort that allows them to swim, that propels them through the water. And of course, their physical skill is impressive, and it helps them go fast, but it's not at the root of what allows them to swim. They can swim because they float. If the human body didn't float no amount of technique, no amount of strength would keep a swimmer on the surface. That's why when you teach children to swim, you first teach them to float. You teach them to go limp in the water so that they can feel the water hold them up. God is teaching Elijah to float. God is teaching Elijah to become still and know that he is God. God is teaching Elijah that he is floating on a sea of God's grace and power and purpose. Because in the face of Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah is going to know that he's carried.

We all need that. I got a communication this week from a member of the congregation - I won't tell you who this person is, but this person has been through a lot lately. His life has been battered by all sorts of tough circumstances. Death, sickness and family conflict. And this person told me that one thing he's learned through all this is that his faith is still intact. He's learned that he's stuck with Jesus. He might have hard questions for God but he's realized that nothing will separate him from the hand of God. All this stuff has happened to him and he's realized that he floats. I don't wish his trouble on anyone. But I do want you all to know that you float. If all your powers were stripped away from you, the arms of Jesus would still bear you up. You don't swim through this world because you are so strong and skilled; you swim through this world because you are floating on God's grace.

In fact, let me suggest a spiritual exercise. Next time you're in a pool or a lake, take a moment to just lie there, let the water lift you up, and then think of God's grace. Let your floating be a kind of prayer

The second reason why God might choose to start his war against the prophets and power of Baal, by reducing Elijah's power, is related to the first one – it's to teach the church what's most essential. The church is called to engage the world, the church is called to speak out against evil and immoral behavior. The church is called to speak out against injustice and speak up on behalf of the weak. But the power of our witness, the power of our testimony, the power which allows us to confront injustice and turn people towards righteousness, does not come from our social power, our government connections, our cultural position, or our political influence. There is nothing wrong with cultural power and political influence, but God starts his fight against Baal with a this tiny, powerless group of people to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Verse one of our passage has an interesting phrase. Elijah comes to Ahab, "in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel whom I serve." In the Hebrew, the literal translation is, "the Lord, the God of Israel, before whom I stand." That's the source of the church's power and authority and effectiveness. We are strong because we stand before his face. At Zarephath, God strips down the church to its most basic. A group of people standing before the face of God, dependent on him, hearts and hands open to him. A group of people who cares for each other, loves each other, carries each other in our hard times, shares miracle bread together, and does it all before the face of God. Later Elijah will confront the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, later Elijah will confront Ahab for the unjust way he has treated Naboth, but all of that fruit comes from the root of being part of the community of people who stand before the face of God.

The best thing any church can do before it engages in any culture war, before it speaks out against any great injustice and social ill is to know itself as a community of love who stands together before the face of God and knows itself as a people of his grace. Without that strong root, anything we do out there will be cut off from the root.

There is only one more place in the Bible where the people of God are even more stripped down than here in 1 Kings 17. That's on Easter morning. On Easter morning the church is reduced to two women who come to the tomb of Jesus expecting only to find death. The disciples had run away; the religious leaders had long ago turned against Jesus. The people of God consisted of two discouraged women who expected nothing. But on that morning those discouraged women found out that Jesus was alive. The power of the resurrection didn't just make these women float, it propelled them. Through their testimony God restarted the entire world.

We have important social tasks in this world. God calls us to these tasks, but the power for this work, the faith for this work, the hope for this work, the love for this work comes when we understand ourselves as a simple loving community caring for each other and standing before the face of our Lord.

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