

1 Kings 18:16-45
Easter 5; May 14, 2017

"To be or not to be – that is the question?" It is probably one of the most famous lines of Shakespeare. In the play, "Hamlet," Did you know that when Hamlet asks that question, he is considering suicide? He is dissatisfied with his life and lists its many torments. Yet, he is unsure what death might bring. Life might be bad, but death might be even worse. Even though Hamlet chooses *"to be,"* it is a question that is at the heart of Shakespeare's famous play. *"To be or not to be – that is the question?"*

I'm not a Shakespeare fan. (I hope I don't disappoint those who might be. I had to take a semester of it in college, a long time ago.) Yet, perhaps, it is that simple question that might summarize the long text of our first reading today. Elijah asks Ahab and the people of Israel a similar question: **"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."** Are you going TO BE a follower of the Lord, or are you NOT GOING TO BE a follower of the Lord? *To be or not to be – that is the question?*

We know how King Ahab answered that question. The Bible tells us that Ahab **"did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him."** Ahab welcomed worship of idols. He brought the worship of Baal to new heights in the worship life of Israel. If his depravity wasn't bad enough, he married a woman named, Jezebel, who was so bad that her name symbolizes promiscuity and immorality. She brought the worship of Asherah into Israel, which was even worse than the worship of Baal. You can only imagine the life that you could get when you mix the worship of Baal, a young god for storms, and Asherah, the goddess of fertility.

The Bible summarizes how God felt toward Ahab: **"(He) did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him."** God was going to send Ahab a message. No rain. No dew. No crops. A slap in the face of this god Baal – who is supposed to be the god who provides crops and fertile ground. God sent this message for three years. It was now time to show who really was the TRUE GOD. So, Elijah gave Ahab a challenge: You get together some of the prophets of Baal (450) and I'll meet you on Mount Carmel. Just to make the odds even more against Elijah, Jezebel sends 400 prophets of Asherah. 850 – 1. The stage is set. It's now time to see: *"to be or not to be!"* No more sitting on the teeter-totter of faith. Who are you going to believe and trust?

Everyone has faith in something. These worshipers of Baal and Asherah had faith. They just didn't have faith in something that was TRUE. You see, it doesn't matter HOW MUCH faith you have in SOMETHING, it matters if that something is TRUTH. For example: you can believe the world is flat all you want, but it doesn't change the fact that it is round. In our Gospel lesson today, that is what Jesus is trying to impress upon his disciples when he says: **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** You want to know how you can get to heaven? No matter how much you shout, dance or good you do will matter. There is only one way to get to heaven – that is through Jesus alone.

The challenge was simple from Elijah was simple. You build an altar. I'll build an altar. We will each put an animal on those altars. You pray to your gods. I'll pray to mine. Whichever God sends down fire from heaven to burn the animal on the altar is the true God. Imagine that scene on Mount Carmel. 850 prophets dancing. Elijah looking at them and having that look that says: *Really...* Those other prophets really tried. Nothing. Elijah now gets in their faces with a little sarcasm: *Maybe your god is hard of hearing and you have to shout louder!* Nothing. *Maybe your god is too busy or on vacation!* Nothing. *Maybe he's asleep. Nice god, you got there guys!* (Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?)

Absolutely nothing happens. They can shout louder. They can start cutting themselves. Blood is flowing. The bull is rotting in the sun on the altar. They are getting more and more frantic. Yet, the response from their god is nothing. Those poor prophets of Baal keep at it the entire day. Nothing.

Then it is Elijah's turn. Elijah has to be one of the most courageous prophets in the Old Testament. Not only is he far outnumbered, he is going to make his challenge even more difficult. He kicks the challenge up another notch. **"Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."** Not just once, but three times. Anyone who has tried to light a campfire when it is raining knows how hard it is to get wood burning when it is soaked with water. Elijah

wants to make sure that anything that is combustible is soaked. He even digs a trench around the altar and it fills with water. He wants to make it clear to everyone whose God was truly God. *To be or not to be?*

They were going to get their answer. **“Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again. 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.”** All of it gone by this blast from heaven!

The people’s response? The only response there could be: **“When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, ‘The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!’** God wanted their trust!

God wants our trust. Jesus says to you and me: **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.”** How do we know that the God we trust, the God in whose hands we have placed our eternal future in, is true? Why can we trust God? The people on that mountain top that day saw a display of God’s power. We also have seen a display of God’s power in these incredible acts throughout the pages of Scripture. Yet, as great as they might be, we believe a God who came to this world, who died for its sins, and rose to life on Easter Sunday. That God gives us eternal life in heaven. Christian faith is based on faith.

Jesus came into this world. He suffered for its sins. He died for its sins. To prove it, he said he was going to do something that no one else could do. After three days, I will raise myself to life! That has never happened. Yes, Jesus and prophets raised people from the dead. But no one has raised themselves. Maybe that’s why it was so hard for the disciples to believe that promise before Easter.

When the people saw Elijah pour all that water over that altar, it didn’t make sense how God was going to win that day on Mt. Carmel. When people saw Jesus on the cross on Good Friday, it didn’t make sense how God was going to win that day. But then came Easter. When Jesus walked out of that grave on Easter, it changed everything. We do not have a dead God! Yet, sometimes, we act like he is. We struggle with doubts. We think maybe he’s sleeping and is too busy. We think that he can’t take care of us. Right? You and I get to go through life with this God walking along side of us. He will never leave us. He will take us to the place where he is.

To be or not to be? May we always trust the God who is, and may we always follow him. Amen.