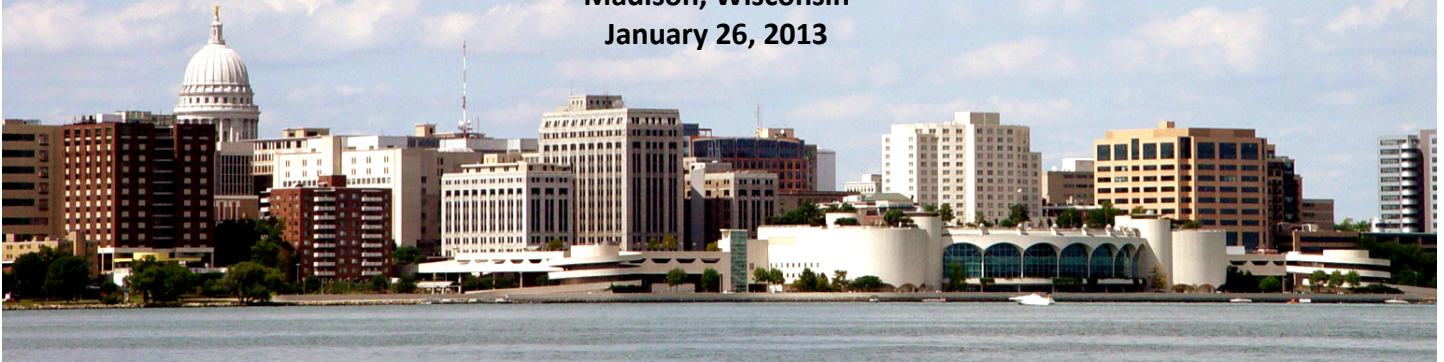


“A Prophet With Courage”

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ELIJAH (PART 1): 1 KINGS 17:1-7

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This morning I would like for us to start a series of lessons based on several scenes from the life of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Elijah is one of the most powerful and one of the most unique characters in the Old Testament. And when we start looking into the life of the prophet Elijah, we find that he arrives on the scene very suddenly, with almost no background information at all, and he also exits the scene in a very unique way. In fact, as far as I can tell, Elijah is one of only two people in the Bible who are described as having never died. If you want to impress the preacher, I would invite you to get with me after worship this morning and tell me the OTHER man who never died. But Elijah was in that elite group of two who never tasted physical death. By the way, last week we studied the first use of the word “Christian” in the Bible, and I challenged you to find the other two. I never heard back from anybody, so that challenge is still open. But Elijah, to say the least, was a unique character.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist is said to have preached with the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Many thought that the Lord himself was Elijah (Matthew 16:14). It was Elijah who was chosen to appear along with Moses and the Lord at the Transfiguration (Mark 9:30). And so we find that Elijah is mentioned a number of times in the New Testament. One of my favorite references comes in James 5:17. Sometimes we tend to put these Bible heroes on a pedestal – they were up here with almost superhuman faith, but we are down here just struggling to get through another day. But that is not the case. In fact, as you might have noticed, Elijah was mentioned in our Scripture reading this morning. In the context of prayer, James says in James 5:17-18, ***“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.”*** James goes on to describe how Elijah prayed that it would not rain, and then how he prayed that it would rain. But the point is, ***“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.”*** In other words, Elijah was like us.

To give a little background to the life and ministry of Elijah, I would say by way of reminder that the nation of Israel was united under Saul, David, and Solomon; however, when Solomon died, the kingdom split, with Jeroboam leading a group to the north and Rehoboam staying in the south. You might remember, several months ago we studied King Jeroboam who split off to the north. Over and over again, the Bible describes Jeroboam as a king who did evil, as a king who ***“caused Israel to sin.”*** Well, Jeroboam was bad – he changed the priesthood, he changed the place of worship, he changed the object of worship from God to Baal, but as we know, when people fall away from God, things will often get even worse over time, and that is exactly what happened. Over the next 30-40 years, the Northern Kingdom went through a number of kings, eventually leading to King Ahab. The Bible tells us in 1 Kings 16:29 that King Ahab ruled for 22 years, and then,

this is what the Bible says in 1 Kings 16:30, ***“Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.”*** So, if we thought Jeroboam was bad (and he was), King Ahab was even worse. The next few verses in 1 Kings 16 go on to explain how ***“as though it had been a trivial thing”*** how Ahab walked in the sins of Jeroboam and how he married Jezebel, the daughter of the Sidonian king. Some have explained that Jezebel was actually a priestess in the worship of Baal. And if you know almost anything about the Bible, you will probably recognize the name Jezebel as being synonymous with any kind of evil woman. I certainly don't want to offend any of our visitors who might be here this morning, but at least for me, up to this point in my life, I have never met a woman named Jezebel. And there is a good reason for that! So, if your name is Jezebel, please forgive me. But in the Bible at least, Jezebel is absolutely rock-solid evil, no question about it. Ahab, the king of Israel, therefore, married Jezebel. And as you can imagine, at that point, in an effort to please his evil wife, King Ahab stepped up the worship of Baal in the Northern Kingdom. Ahab was evil, but he was brought down even further by his even more horrible wife. In fact, I would say that Ahab was a spineless coward. Instead of leading his home and the nation closer to God, Ahab allowed himself to be dragged down by his wife, even deeper down into the pit.

Now, here is the strange thing: In all of this, the economy of the nation of Israel was booming! At this point, militarily, things were going very well. The nation was prospering as it had never prospered before. But as you can imagine, this situation was just tearing God to pieces. God was completely torn up over this. And that is what brings us to the prophet Elijah.

The first reference to Elijah is found in 1 Kings 17 (p. 578). Before we get into Chapter 17, I would make just a brief comment to the Wednesday night crowd. Several weeks ago, we studied the fall of Jericho, and you might remember the curse that was given by Joshua back in Joshua 6:26. After they leveled the city, Joshua said, ***“Cursed before the Lord is the man who rises up and builds this city Jericho; with the loss of his firstborn he shall lay its foundation, and with the loss of his youngest son he shall set up its gates.”*** Just to set the scene here: We are now roughly 400 years removed from the fall of Jericho. Elijah steps in at the beginning of 1 Kings 17. I want us to notice the last verse of the previous chapter, the last verse of 1 Kings 16, speaking of the reign of Ahab, ***“In his days Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segup, according to the word of the Lord, which He spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.”*** Very interesting! It seems that we have a little foreboding here! To most people, it might have seemed as if God was maybe no longer interested, it might have seemed as if maybe God had forgotten about what was going on in the Northern Kingdom. But then, out of nowhere, having forgotten about God's law for many years, some guy thinks it is a good idea to rebuild Jericho, and for some unexplained reason, he loses two children in the process. Those few who knew the word of God would have remembered and would have been reminded that God was still very much aware of what was going on in the nation of Israel.

With that, we pick up with 1 Kings 17 as a prophet of God steps out of nowhere with a message for the king. Notice, please, 1 Kings 17:1-7,

Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” The word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there.” So he went and did according to the word of the Lord, for he went and lived by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread

and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook. It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

As we look back at this chapter, and as we introduce the prophet Elijah, I would like for us to learn pretty much one lesson from Elijah this morning, and the lesson comes from the fact that **ELIJAH WAS A MAN OF TREMENDOUS COURAGE**. I don't remember ever having a one point sermon before, but since all of you braved the snow to be here, you are about to be witnesses that it is possible. The one lesson I want us to take home with us this morning is that Elijah was a man of courage.

In verse 1, notice that Elijah basically appears out of nowhere and has a message for King Ahab, and the message is, ***"As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."*** When I say that Elijah appears out of nowhere, I am saying that he has no family tree to establish any kind of authority. There is no reference to any kind of education. There are no degrees listed after his name. Instead, he only identifies himself as a Tishbite, a settler of Gilead, he stands before the king of the land, and he brings a message directly from God. I love how he refers to God ***"before whom I stand."*** What a picture! We see Elijah standing between God and the king. When I first started learning how to preach, I remember reading a book by John R.W. Stott, and the book on preaching was titled, *Between Two Worlds*. Mr. Stott described the work of the preacher as standing between two worlds – standing with one foot in heaven and one foot on the earth, bridging the gap with a message from God to mankind. And that is what we see here as Elijah identifies God as the one ***"before whom I stand."***

And the courageous message from Elijah is very simple, ***"Surely there shall be neither dew or rain these years, except by my word."*** What we don't know from the text, but what we do know from history and archaeology is that Baal was considered to be the Canaanite god of storm and thunder. In fact, Baal was often pictured with a lightning bolt in his right hand – his right hand held up over his head as if he were about to smite somebody with that lightning. Baal was also the god of fertility. Baal was the one who supposedly brought the rain to the earth. The name "Baal," by the way, means "lord, possessor, or husband." Elijah, then, shows up with a message from the God of Israel who lives and makes the very bold statement that it would not rain (and neither would there even be any dew on the ground) until Elijah gave the word – a very direct and courageous challenge to those who worshiped Baal. And one more note here: Please remember Jezebel's background! Jezebel, a priestess of Baal, was married to King Ahab and very well might have been right there in Ahab's presence as Elijah made this statement.

I would ask, therefore: Where did Elijah develop this courage? Where did this come from? I would suggest the very real possibility that Elijah got it from his mom and dad. You might be thinking, "Wait a minute! How do we make that leap?" There is something I didn't tell you earlier. The name Elijah means, "Yahweh is the Lord." I want us to picture this. The nation of Israel has left God completely. For 30-40 years, various kings have followed in the footsteps of Jeroboam. The current king and his wife are orchestrating a full-scale focus on Baal as the new god of Israel. And somewhere in Israel, a mom and dad have a baby boy, and they name that child "Yahweh is the Lord." I think you might agree that Elijah had some tough parents, and tough parents have a way of raising some tough children! Elijah, then, was man of amazing courage.

In the rest of this paragraph, we find that God directs Elijah to a brook out in the middle of nowhere. The word ***"brook"*** (in verse 3) is sometimes translated ***"wadi."*** I had to look this up, but a wadi is a dry creek bed that only has water when it rains. I think of those concrete culverts out in Los Angeles where they are always having the cop chases. Those culverts are normally pretty dry and only have water when it rains. But notice:

Elijah is sent into the wilderness to camp out by one of those wadis, but in the middle of the drought, this particular wadi has a constant flow of water. That right there is a miracle!

And then we find that God also provided ravens to bring him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening. I think all of us are probably familiar with ravens. Ravens are those huge black birds that are always getting in the trash! Ravens are scavengers. Personally, I probably wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to eat something that was brought to be by a raven, but that is the way God chose to take care of this man. I would point out that there is some balance here: God does not protect Elijah from any discomfort, but neither does God allow his prophet to live in luxury. Yes, God kept Elijah alive, but even Elijah suffered as a result of the drought.

The point is: Elijah courageously brought a message from God to the king, and this message was very firmly rooted in the Scriptures. Anybody who knew anything about the Law of Moses would have thought back to God's warning way back in Deuteronomy 11:16-17. Even before they crossed over the Jordan River, God said through Moses, ***"Beware that your hearts are not deceived, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Or the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and you will perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you."*** Elijah, therefore, brought that message to the king – this drought is a punishment from God.

Elijah, then, is an example for us today – just as Moses spoke to Pharaoh, just as Paul spoke to King Agrippa, so also all of us (at some point) will most likely be put in a place where we need some serious courage to speak up on God's behalf. As Christians, all of us are priests, all of us are ministers, all of us have one foot in this world and one foot in the next. It doesn't matter how eloquent we are, or what kind of education we've had, but what matters is that we speak up for God, as we should. It is not about us – it is all about the message.

Most of us have probably heard the story from a number of years ago, the story of a man who was running for his second term as governor of Massachusetts. At this particular campaign stop, he was eating at a church barbeque. He hadn't eaten all day and when he finally went through the line, the woman serving the chicken gave him just one little piece. The governor said, "Ma'am, may I please have two?" The woman said, "No, just one." He said, "But ma'am, I am starving. I haven't eaten all day." She said, "One per customer." Now this governor was normally fairly laid back, but he was really, really hungry, so he finally said, "Ma'am, do you know who I am? I am the governor of this state!" And at that point, the woman said, "Do you know who I am? I am the chicken lady. Now move on." I am assuming that that woman needed some courage to stick to the plan.

And that is the one lesson I would like for us to learn this morning: It takes courage to speak God's word. Elijah was a prophet with tremendous courage. He spoke up and delivered a message to the king, giving us an example to follow.

Where do we need courage? Sometimes today, we need courage just to admit that we are Christians. If we could imagine a situation at work or in the neighborhood: We have a decent relationship with a fellow worker or a next-door neighbor. We get to know the person and we discover that the person is not a New Testament Christian. Maybe they have no faith at all, maybe they are part of a man-made denomination, or maybe they just don't know what they believe. At that point, we know that if we open the door to any kind of religious discussion, and if they reject it in some way, we know that we have probably made that relationship a little awkward in the future. How do we handle that? It seems that courage is needed – the courage to step out and

say something. Without the courage to at least crack the door open a little bit, we may never know what might happen, but often, fear has a way of keeping us quiet when we really need to say something. We think of what Winston Churchill said during World War II, "Courage is the virtue that makes all other virtues possible." Without courage, it is very difficult to do so much of what the Lord expects us to do. I would point out that courage is not the absence of fear. It was John Wayne who said, "Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway." Sometimes I wonder what was going through Elijah's mind as he made his way to meet up with King Ahab that first time. I don't know, but thankfully, Elijah had the courage to saddle up anyway, and that is the point of this passage and one of the great lessons we learn from the life of Elijah: Elijah was a man of courage.

Conclusion:

Hopefully, in two weeks we will be able to jump back into this passage as we study what happens next. You might have noticed right at the end of this paragraph, the brook that wasn't even supposed to be there in the first place, also dried up. Feel free to read ahead, but I believe that was God's way of nudging Elijah along to what would happen next. Even men of great courage sometimes need a nudge. And so, if the Lord wills, we will be able to study the rest of this chapter in two weeks.

As we close, I want to remind all of us why we are here. The Lord Jesus came to this earth to offer Himself as a perfect sacrifice, to die in our place. That is the love and grace of God. In response to that offer, we are invited to love God and to put God first in our lives. Once we believe in Jesus as being the Son of God, we turn away from sin (we repent) – we have a change of mind resulting in a change in the way we live. At that point, we are told to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. God is at work in the act of baptism, we are born again and the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, let us know, but if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com