

*“Testing Grounds”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 2, 2010

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Scriptures: 1 Kings 18: 20-39

*Elijah’s Triumph over the Priests of Baal*

20 So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. <sup>21</sup> Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” The people did not answer him a word. <sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said to the people, “I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal’s prophets number four hundred fifty. <sup>23</sup> Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. <sup>24</sup> Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.” All the people answered, “Well spoken!” <sup>25</sup> Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.” <sup>26</sup> So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. <sup>27</sup> At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep

and must be awakened.”<sup>28</sup> Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them.<sup>29</sup> As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

<sup>30</sup> Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come closer to me”; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down; <sup>31</sup> Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, “Israel shall be your name”; <sup>32</sup> with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. <sup>33</sup> Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” <sup>34</sup> Then he said, “Do it a second time”; and they did it a second time. Again he said, “Do it a third time”; and they did it a third time, <sup>35</sup> so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

<sup>36</sup> At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. <sup>37</sup> Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” <sup>38</sup> Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. <sup>39</sup> When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.”

## **Gather at the Altar**

This week we met some new folks – well, new to us – in our Chalice Thrift store.

Our neighbors found us almost by accident.

They had stopped at the post office and noticed our church thrift store signage.

So they dropped in for a few minutes

and were pleasantly surprised to find such nice “re-purposed goods”

at such low prices.

When they learned that the proceeds support charities,

well, they were pleased as punch.

One of the couple said, *“This is one of the nice things that churches can do.”*

Yes, indeed, this is one of the nice things that churches can do.

We do so heartily agree.

The whole people of God,

once filled with the Holy Spirit,

can do all things in Christ Jesus.

May this sacred space and safe place be holy ground  
for doing good and good deeds and building good  
disciples

in the name of Jesus Christ.

Lest we forget or neglect or disrespect the Source from whom  
all good things come,

everything we do and are has its genesis here at this  
altar.

From this church's lowest levels that house our thrift store,

hand bell and chancel choir rooms and the Decatur  
Education Foundation

to the steeple meditation room,

from the well-kept rooms that foster spiritual  
formation and fellowship

to those used for counseling and  
communicating,

praying and planning, social activity and  
advocating,

all are connected with the love  
generating from the altar.

Here at the altar we encounter the holy.

Here couples are married in the sight of God and their family

and friends.

Here rest flowers that signify births and memorials.

Here we gather together after a full week of daily living and working and serving.

Here we are refilled and refueled, repurposed and re-empowered.

Here the Bread of Life and the Cup of the New Covenant  
are set, blessed, and shared freely and openly  
to all who would receive the love of God.

Our living, breathing prayer as a Christian congregation  
is that this altar, this Lord's Table,

    this sacred place of grace and gracious  
hospitality

                                  may be host and home for one and all  
from every walk of life.

Once upon a time the altar of the very first church of Jesus  
Christ

    proved to be a safe space and sacred place

for the building up of the community;  
for healing the sick and suffering;  
for feeding the hungry and liberating the  
oppressed;  
for doing justice, loving mercy, and walking  
humbly with our God.

Let us be very much aware that not all altars are holy.

Not all altars that begin with good intentions remain that way.

Not all altars point people to the One who created and creates.

You know as well as I that some altars mislead.

Some are merely mirrors.

Some altars exclude, or divide, or condemn, or point to nothing at all.

Such is the case of the altar built by King Ahab.

Before us this morning we have a challenging passage of Scripture

that focuses on the faith journeys of prophets and priests and people

who have gather first at the altar of Baal and then the altar of God.

In First Kings 18 we read the story of Elijah  
and his spiritual duel with the priests of Baal,  
a contest of wills and faith  
that took place at Mount Carmel  
in front of King Ahab and the  
people of Israel.

King Ahab was invited by the Lord to worship the God of  
love,

but Ahab would have none of it.

Ahab built a 90 feet tall graven image of Baal.

He commanded everyone to worship Baal, the god of fertility  
and rain.

This is proof positive and a healthy reminder

that good intentions alone are insufficient

when it comes to spiritual formation.

Enter Elijah.

Elijah, the poet, the prophet, the person

whose singular name was the essence of his mission.

Elijah means, *“The Lord (Eli) is my God (Jah).”*

God sent Elijah to oppose by word and action Baal worship and those who engage in it.

Ahab said to Elijah, *“Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”*

Elijah responded, *“I have not made trouble for Israel, but you have,*

*when you refused to obey God’s commands and have followed Baal.”*

Elijah then took his message to the people.

*“How long will you waver between two opinions?”*

*“If the Lord is God, follow God; if Baal, follow Baal.”*

But the people were silent.

The Hebrew word for waver is similar to dance.

He asks his listeners, *“How long will you dance with two gods,*

*hedging your bets, neglecting to practice loyalty?”*

Elijah’s voice calls out across the ages asking us,

*“How many altars do you and I worship at, my friends?”*



Is our loyalty divided?

Do we ever waver between Christ and whatever looks good at the moment?

Elijah proposed a contest, a duel, if you will.

He proposed that they build two altars, put a bull on each, but do not set them on fire.

First the priests of Baal may call on their god to set it ablaze.

Then Elijah would pray for the Lord God to set the altar aflame.

Whoever's god does so first will be the winner and the true Lord of life.

In effect, Elijah pointed out that the priests and people and king are testing God.

We know about this part, don't we, the part about testing God, putting God to the test.

Do you want or need proof that God is real?

Are you of the mindset that God must pass your test

before you deign to give God

all your allegiance and gratitude,

all your worship and wonder,

all your tithes and talents?

Do you ever bargain with God?

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified bargaining as one of the stages of grief.

Bargaining in order to get our way

is also a stage of faith formation and doubt, of questioning and wondering.

*O Lord, if you do this for me first, then I will do that for you.*

*God, please help me out of this pickle, and then I will...*

*Jesus, if you treat me right, then I will know that you are you...*

What is it about humanity that we attempt to make God jump through hoops?

How much energy do we invest in vetting God?

Is any of that energy really, truly necessary?

How about if we simply allow our faith to grow

to get to a place where we trust,

trust and obey,

trust and obey and love?

Jesus Christ was a miracle worker, and the source and intent

of all his miracles was love.

Jesus never tried to prove himself.

Even when he was tempted, betrayed, and then crucified,

Jesus Christ proved that God is love,

that the love of God rules all and conquers all

and has already overcome the world,  
fear, sin, even death itself.

Elijah knows, and we know in our heart of hearts,

that God's love for you does not need to be proven.

God loves you.

Such love needs no proof.

Love abides.

Love heals.

Love saves.

Love redeems.

Even so, Elijah said to the priest of Baal and he says to us:

*God will take your test and pass with flying colors.*

God will accept the challenge

to prove that the Lord is alive and at work in the world  
today.

This miracle will happen not because God has to;

God will act in this moment of time

because God wants to have a loving  
relationship

with you, with me, with all of us.

And so began the testing on the ground at Mount Carmel.

The 450 priests of Baal chanted and sang, wailed and yelled  
yet nothing happened.

Elijah mocked them, saying,

*“Maybe your god is asleep, or out of town, or has  
forgotten you. Yell louder!”* Yet no matter what they did or  
said, their altar was silent and still.

Elijah then gathered 12 stones – each stone a symbol of the  
12 tribes of Israel,

a visual reminder to the people of their covenant that  
they had forgotten.

You see, God’s loving activity is personal and communal;

God’s covenant with us is both local and global.

Then Elijah prayed.

*“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel,*

*let it be known this day that you are God in Israel,*

*that I am your servant,*

*and that I have done all these things at  
your bidding.*

*Answer me, O Lord, answer me,*

*so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are  
God,*

*and that you have turned their hearts back.”*

His prayer was simple and heartfelt,

an appeal to the Lord to remember God’s people,

and to the people to remember the One from  
whom all blessings come,

the one to whom all people owe  
allegiance and gratitude.

*Then the fire of the Lord fell*

*and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the  
stones, and the dust,*

*and even licked up the water that was in the  
trench.*

*When all the people saw it,*

*they fell on their faces and said,*

*“The Lord indeed is God; the Lord (Eli) indeed is God (Jah).”*

What they said was *Eli-Jah! Eli-Jah!*

What they said was, in effect, a profession of faith: *Elijah, the Lord indeed is God!*

Whenever you get tempted to waver,  
shout *Eli-Jah!*

Whenever you feel like vetting God instead of trusting God,  
bargaining with God instead of obeying God,  
shout *Eli-Jah!*

Whenever you think you need proof instead of faith,  
shout *Eli-Jah!*

Whenever you're not sure what altar to kneel before,  
shout *Eli-Jah!*

And regardless of whether you feel or think that your life is aligned with Christ,

gather at the altar of God to give thanks and shout *Eli-Jah!*

Yes, indeed, this is one of the nice things that churches can do!

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

#### EXTRA MATERIAL:

The reality show personality Heidi Montag

recently underwent 10 plastic surgery procedures on a single day.

Montag told *People* [magazine] that, before deciding to take these measures,

*“I prayed about it for a long time and said,  
‘God, if it’s wrong, then I won’t do it.’”*

In a spoof of her bargaining prayer, Paul Rudnick writes in the *New Yorker*

that the full text of Montag’s prayer has only recently been made available:

*Dear Lord: As You probably know, because I guess You*

*sort of know everything,*

*I'm thinking about having a mini brow lift;*

*lipo on my neck, waist, hips, and  
thighs; a chin reduction;*

*an ear job; fat injections in my cheeks...and  
lips;*

*a revision of my previous rhino-plasty;*

*a redo of my earlier breast  
implants;*

*Botox injections in my forehead and frown  
area;*

*and a buttocks augmentation, if that is  
Thy will.*

*I won't go ahead with any of this if You don't  
approve,*

*but I keep thinking,*

*Why would God have made my plastic surgeon,*

*Dr. Frank Ryan, so totally cute if He didn't want me  
to use him?*

*Although, of course, I also wondered,*

*Why did God make my hips and thighs, both  
inner and outer,*

*a teeny bit chunky,*

*and why did He dig those  
grooves around my nose?*



*But then I thought, Maybe because God creates so many gazillions*

*of new people every day*

*there are bound to be some manufacturing imperfections,*

*so in a way my nose is just a facial Toyota.*

*Or maybe my parents never prayed enough, so God said,*

*“I’m going to teach them a spiritual lesson*

*by sending them a daughter with low,*

*almost angry-looking eyebrows.”*

*I bet that Angelina Jolie’s mother prayed every second of the day,*

*especially for Angelina’s lips.*

*Sometimes I just want to call up my mother and say,*

*“Gee, thanks, Mom.*

*Maybe I wouldn’t need to have my ears pinned back*

*if you hadn’t spent so much time worshipping Satan.”*

*...Anyway, thank You so much for listening to me and all my tiny problems,*

*some of which will hopefully get tinier*

*and two of which should probably get twice as big,*

*don't You agree?*

*Because I was thinking that if I can look really pretty and perfect*

*then I can be Your best possible advertisement.*

*It's, like, people already look at me*

*and sometimes I hear them whisper,*

*"Dear*

*God."* [http://www.newyorker.com/humor/2010/05/31/100531sh\\_shouts\\_rudnick#ixzzopMs6DGU2](http://www.newyorker.com/humor/2010/05/31/100531sh_shouts_rudnick#ixzzopMs6DGU2)