

YOU CANNOT NOT DECIDE

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 18:17-21, RSV

"It's now or never." "Fish or cut bait." "Speak now or forever hold your peace." "Now is the day of salvation." "He that is not with me is against me."

Every language contains sayings which urge that the moment of decision has come, that instant when you cannot not decide. It happened this week to a judge presiding over the trial of a 17-year-old who was drunk while driving and killed several passengers in his truck as well as the driver of another car. Convicted of several crimes, the time for sentencing had come.

It happens in weddings when the question is put directly to each man and woman. The most celebrated and dramatic biblical example of such a moment is Elijah on Mt. Carmel— the prophet, the solitary figure in coarse garments, wind-blown, taunting, daring, humiliating the priests of Baal and finally, summoning Israel to decision.

The story is well known. Ahab has become king, succeeding his father Omri. He is more evil than any king in the northern kingdom of Israel's short history. Israel is prospering, much more so than Judah to the south. Ahab proves to be a brilliant field commander, a great builder and a poor chooser of wives. For political reasons, he marries the daughter of Ethbaal, priest-king of Tyre. Her name was Jezebel and she was, by any standard, a religious fanatic devoted to Baal-Melkart, the god of Tyre. As you know immoral practices were associated with this worship.

A temple for Baal was built in Israel's capital, Samaria. Altars to Baal were erected in many places. Hundreds of prophets of Baal were supported by Jezebel's wealth and it was not long before almost the entire nation followed her example. It was not that Baal was revered instead of Yahweh, but alongside of him.

Living with green pastures, fattened flocks and abundant water, the Israelites were persuaded that God was not angry with them. Prosperity is always the most dangerous economic situation for the church. Sin never seems evil when things are going well.

From the mountains of Gilead, God calls an obscure man to speak to Ahab about his evil and the evil of the people. Baal was venerated as the god of storm and water. Therefore Elijah's message came in the form of a prediction that the waters would dry up for years until he, himself, by his word from God, spoke differently.

This was a direct challenge to Ahab, Jezebel and Baal. Elijah then disappears. He hides near the brook Cherith for some time and then is sheltered by a heathen widow for whom God performs a miracle. Ahab looks everywhere for the prophet but he cannot find him.

Infuriated Jezebel massacres as many of God's prophets as she can find. "If I cannot get Elijah I will get as many of the others as I can!" Obadiah, faithful to God and the one who supervises Ahab's household, risks his life to hide 100 prophets in a cave. Bread and water, most likely from Ahab's house itself, sustain them.

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The years pass and by the third year of the drought, green fields are gone, the flocks wander and bleat as they die of thirst, dust storms become common and virtually no stream has water flowing in it. One would think that the longer the drought, the more likelihood the nation would repent. But that was not so. Jezebel's resolve only hardened.

The people were persuaded that Elijah was to blame and that as soon as he was killed for his impudence, Baal would restore rain to the land. Even the most obvious facts are distortable by twisted minds. Blaming Elijah!

Finally Elijah is told to confront Ahab. Obadiah is out searching for water and grass to keep some of the animals from perishing. He has taken one section and Ahab has taken another. Obadiah meets Elijah— the one who has not been seen for years, the one feared by Ahab and hated by Jezebel. Elijah tells Obadiah to carry a message to Ahab that he wants to see him. "Wherein have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me? As soon as I tell him," Obadiah pleads, "the Holy Spirit will take you away from Ahab and I will be punished."

Elijah assures him that he will meet Ahab that very day. When Ahab hears that Elijah wants to see him, he is struck with fear. The prophet would not be this bold if he did not have another message from Yahweh— one that might even be worse than the last one.

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" "I have not troubled Israel," Elijah replies, "but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals." (1 Kings 18:18)

The Lord had declared,

"If you will obey my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be full. Take heed lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, and he shut up the heavens, so that there be no rain, and the land yield no fruit, and you perish quickly off the good land which the Lord gives you." (Deut. 11:13-17)

God had warned them that if they disobeyed, severe judgments would follow. The time of judgment had come. If you go back to the story of Abraham, Elijah's work is set in the larger story of God's dealing with Israel from the beginning. After sin, which disrupted God's creation, the world comes under God's judgment and his wrath.

To deal with this corruption of his original plan, God makes a promise to Abraham. Abraham is promised descendants through whom God will save the world (one descendant in particular) and he is promised a land: A new community and a new land—the two most important blessings possible in the ancient world. Israel's history is God's response to the sinful rebellion of the whole human race, and Abraham and his descendants are "invested with worldwide significance." (Elizabeth Actemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel*, p. 49.)

The question asked in the first six books of the Bible following the promise to Abraham is, "Did Yahweh keep his word?" The resounding answer is YES.

1. Yahweh struggles with the obstacles to his promise of descendants—with Sarah's entrance into the Pharaoh's harem (Gen. 12:10-20); with the old age of Abraham and his wife (Gen. 18:11); with the barrenness of Rebekah (Gen. 25:21) and Rachel (Gen. 30:1); with the threat to the life of Jacob, the bearer of the promise; with Esau and Laban; with the famine in Egypt and his watchcare over Joseph; with the slaughter of all the male babies in Egypt—a thousand human incidents occur in all these stories. Through them all, Yahweh, Lord God of Israel, preserves his people and keeps his promise.
2. Yahweh gives them a land—the story of the Exodus. He remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see Exodus 2:24). When they finally possess the land at the end of the book of Joshua, the record tells us "Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land which he swore to give to their fathers..." (Joshua 21:43)

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of how God kept his promise and Israel repeatedly broke its promise, the story of God's judgment to remind them of their covenant with him, their repentance, his forgiveness, and their subsequent failures to keep their promise—time after time after time. The story of God's faithfulness is in stark contrast to the unfaithfulness of his people!

With this background, the Elijah story is decisive for Israel, the northern kingdom. Already their sin has divided the nation and they have come to the decisive moment. Elijah, fearless, orders Ahab to a confrontation: "Gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." (1 Kings 18:19.)

Messengers are sent everywhere and from every town and village people begin to walk to the mountain—the mountain of decision. They knew this would be no ordinary confrontation and they were afraid. Elijah was too confident, too imperial, too strong. The top of the mountain was almost barren. It used to be green with spring water in abundance. There were altars there to Baal and on one of the highest ridges the people could see the altar to Yahweh, now broken down.

The king and the priests arrive. Baal, the god of rain, has not been too successful against Elijah's God. The priests are humiliated.

Elijah stands alone this day, his jaw set, his eyes clear. Thousands and thousands are against him. He speaks: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" (The best translation of the Hebrew is "hopping from one foot to the other.") Scholarship has shown that a syncretism (the combination of different forms of belief or practice) existed—a fusion of Yahweh and Baal worship in the minds of the people (except in the mind of someone like Jezebel).

Elijah regarded this compromise as impossible. Baal is the god who in the mythological stories from Ugarit dies each year. When he revives with the autumn rains, he restores fertility to the earth. Yahweh claims control over the earth and the rain.

Elijah sets the ground rules for the contest which is to decide between the rival claims. Each side

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is to be given a bull which is then to be prepared for sacrifice, but no fire is provided. Each side is to call on the name of his god. The one responding by fire establishes himself as God. The people consent to the plan... ("On Reading the Elijah Narratives," Brevard S. Childs, April, 1980, *Interpretation*, pp. 131-132.)

The priests cut themselves, dance and shout from morning to noon. At noon when they are in a frenzy, Elijah begins to mock them. "Maybe your god is in deep thought, has gone aside (a better translation is "visiting the privy"), is on a journey, or has fallen asleep." Blood is gushing from the bodies of the frantic priests, with Elijah taunting them mercilessly. Baal is a delusion.

Elijah's turn comes. He is calm, confident. The assurance of God's presence makes him calm, not hysterical. He asks the people to come closer. They must see everything that is about to take place. The Bible describes Yahweh's broken altar in great detail. Slowly Elijah rebuilds it, carefully recovering Israel's past, its promise to God. Twelve stones for the 12 tribes of Israel are used in its construction. He then has a deep trench dug around the carefully placed offering. Next he drenches the offering with water three times. Elijah is so confident of victory that as scarce as water is he wastes it freely in this crucial moment.

When he finishes Elijah prays: "God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel (Not Jacob—he is emphasizing the role of the nation as God's promised descendant.) let it be known that thou art God in Israel...answer me...answer me...turn their hearts back."

Thousands of people are watching yet you can hear a pin drop. Only the slightest breeze is audible. With an explosion, fire like lightning comes down from the heavens and the offering, the wood, the stone, the dust and the water in the trench are vaporized in an instant.

The people fall on their faces exclaiming, "Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is God." In harmony with the Mosaic law, the false priests are killed. God's judgment is finished.

Malachi tells us that "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of God," God would send a message in the spirit and power of Elijah. That message came in the time of Jesus the Christ through John the Baptist. Most people accept that his ministry was only a down payment on the complete fulfillment when Jesus returns the second time when the great and dreadful day of God is here. All of the imagery in the Old Testament about the stars falling, the sun not giving its light, etc., was associated with the Day of Judgment.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that the Elijah of the 20th Century is a people with a particular message. We believe that the time of God's judgment is here. We are at Mt. Carmel now. Just as in the days of Elijah it makes no difference that the number is small, it makes no difference that the message is not loud and splashy, it makes no difference that the religious life of God's Elijah messenger is not the kind that people find fascinating to behold.

There can be no mixing of our loyalties, no compromising of our promises to God. The Elijah message is clear that the altars to Baal in our lives must be torn down. Remember that these altars exist side by side with the true altars. It is seldom the case that we reject God and go out and do other things. The case is that we try to do it all together. We try to be believers in Christ and believers in other things. We

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don't understand what is happening to us because things go so well.

The Elijah message says that the time is over for hopping from one foot to the other. It is time to get both feet planted firmly and make a decision.

The choice is clear. When I choose God I choose to go against all others. If I choose my wife I choose not to have all others. It is an exclusionary choice. If the Lord be God then follow him! But if Baal then follow him and watch your lives and your children's lives dry up like a desert. The rain cannot fall.

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