



What is saving your life right now?

That is the question posed to Barbara Brown Taylor by a pastor who invited her to come talk to the congregation he served. That is the question that underlies her book *An Altar in the World*.¹ It is the question that underlies each of our readings today.

In First Kings chapter 18, we have a battle between Elijah and the god Baal. Which God reigns? Which god is saving the life of his people at that moment in time? As the prophet Elijah questions the Israelites: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” Interesting phrasing: limping with two different opinions. When you won’t make up your mind, you can’t be strong in your convictions, thus you limp along. You live with difficulty because you are torn between positions. Limping along is no way to live in the long run. Elijah’s question reminds us of an earlier passage in Joshua:

“choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). It is a question that is before us every day if we are honest with ourselves.

Some context can help us work through this reading. The book of First and Second Kings is so named because the people of Israel have decided that they want what their neighbors have: a king. God and God’s prophets warn them repeatedly of the dangers of kings, or of political power, but the people insist. And so the time of prophets and judges leading the people ends with the raising up of David as the first king and his son Solomon as successor.

And after a while, along comes Ahab as king and we are told that he “did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him ... And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam,... Ahab took as his wife, Jezebel... and went and served Baal, and worshiped him” (1 Kings 16: 30-31). This sets up the stage for the emergence of Elijah who tells Ahab “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years” (1 Kings 17:1). And so it was. For 3 years the land suffered a severe drought which brings us to our reading today. The showdown between Baal and our God.

Baal has been pictured as the god of thunder and lightning. A god of fire and of water. A god who holds symbols in his hands of a lightning bolt and a hammer – something like the Greek God Zeus. But Baal doesn’t answer and Elijah taunts 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” (1 Kings 18:27). The picture here is of a god who can’t be

¹ Harper Collins, 2009.

bothered with petty human problems or even significant problems like the need for water. It flies in the face of what we read last week in Psalm 8: “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than God” (Ps. 8: 4-5a)/

And so it is that Baal is asleep or is gone wandering or, maybe, gasp! not a god that has power over the elements of water and fire – and maybe not a god at all. Maybe the people have gone astray. They have forgotten that God pledged to them that God would care for them if they would recognize God as Lord of all.

Then it is time for Elijah. He gathers the people closer so they could see what he was doing. First, he repaired the altar with 12 stones representing the twelve sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel. Then Elijah dug a trench around the altar, which surely had some people puzzled. He put the wood on the altar for the fire to burn the sacrificial bull. And then, in a time of extreme drought, he called upon the people to fill four jars with water and to pour it on the wood. Do it a second time. Do it a third time. There are a total of 12 jars, once again recalling the 12 tribes of Israel.

Can't you imagine the restlessness of the people? That's water we could drink! That's water I could give to my animals so they won't die of thirst? Why is Elijah wasting all this water? After all, why should God hear us when Baal did not? But Elijah perseveres and prays:

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 (I Kings 18: 36-37).

And so it came to be. The fire came down from heaven and consumed the offering, the wood, the stones and the dust and “even licked up the water that was in the trench. God was God indeed. And the drought ends.

We don't have an Elijah. We don't have an altar built of stones with wood and a sacrificial animal and fire from heaven. What we do have is a reminder that it is God who hears us. It is God who sustains and renews us even when our drought is metaphorical rather than factual. And droughts do come, whether we will them to or not. Each of us has had, or will have, some time when we question what we believe, why we believe, and if there are boundaries to our faith.

This is an entertaining story. It is also a deeply theological story. It is both ancient and modern. First is the question about what is saving your life today? Is your allegiance to God or is your allegiance to the current trends? What is an idol for you – idol in the sense of something other than worshipping God as the center of your being?

Our challenge, particularly with a 24/7 news cycle (and I'm not even sure it's correct to call it “news”) is that it is so easy for us to get distracted. Our attention spans are shortening all the time. Blame for this can be laid at any number of different doors, including too much technology. “Instant” messaging. No or little time for reflection. Less training in our school around critical thinking. A lessening sense of what plagiarism is – it's simply ok to copy and paste from Wikipedia without any sense that we may need to dig deeper into propositions set before us. It's easier to just go along with the crowd. And so Baal comes back to life and the God

I Kings 18: 20-39; Psalm 96; Galatians 1: 1-12; Luke 7: 1-10

is Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is pushed into the back corner of our closet. Jesus reminds us that we cannot serve two masters (Mt. 6: 24). Choose this day whom you will serve.

This doesn't mean we always get it right. It doesn't mean that we don't get distracted or sometimes go astray. After all, we are social creatures who want affirmation from our peers. We want to be part of the in-group. We want to be accepted.

In her chapter on *The Practice of Encountering Others*, Taylor writes:

What we have most in common is not religion but humanity. I learned this from my religion, which also teaches me that encountering another human being is as close to God as I may ever get.²

There is no limping along between two options when we focus on the spark of God that lives within each of us. There is no limping along between two options when, in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'" (Isaiah 30:21).

Remember and enjoy the story of the Elijah and the followers of Baal- laugh at the silliness and reflect on the deep theological questions. What is saving your life today?

² Id, 102.