

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

Americans are typically results-oriented. If your car needs more than three major repairs in six months, you might think about replacing it with a more reliable vehicle. Results matter to you. Many of you who work for others must sit for a periodic review of your work performance. A friend told me that he was required, as a part of his review, to list the ways that he had saved the company money. Results matter to our bosses. When we shop, if the website is hard to use, or if the bricks-n-mortar staff doesn't treat us the way we want, we take our business elsewhere. Results matter to our sense of self-respect.

This isn't necessarily bad. We enjoy a lot of blessings because of high standards. But we can take things too far, especially during the extra stress brought on by this pandemic. I find it harder to be patient, kind, and gentle, and easier to get worked up over things. It seems a lot of us have become Sponge-Bob Grouchy Pants ever since the rioting started. You may feel that you are more easily set off, less tolerant of others' folly, less able to deal with the criticism of others. If results matter, I would ask you to evaluate whether the way you're trying to deal with things is working. Satan, you see, loves to make people miserable, offended, grumpy. If he can drive a wedge between you and others, it's smile time for him. If he can drive a wedge between you and your church family, and if this leads you to lose connection with Jesus, it's happy dance time for Satan. He knows how dangerous it is for you to despise God's Word. If you stop taking time to feed your faith on God's Word, less gets done to advance the kingdom of Christ into more

hearts. Soon the work of calling people to faith in Jesus grinds to a halt. Happy day for Satan. More people with him.

That's exactly what the prophet Elijah sees happening when our sermon text for today begins. But we need the backstory to understand what's happening. So here it is. The king of Israel at this time is a wicked man by the name of Ahab. Ahab loves to think up new ways to do evil. His wife Jezebel wants to replace 'the worship of the Lord' with 'the worship of her false gods Baal and Ashtoreth.' Recently she tracked down all the Lord's prophets in Israel and put them to death. Meanwhile, the ranks of her false prophets have swelled to 450.

The Lord does not put up with this kind of rebellion forever. He wants first place in our hearts. So through Elijah, the Lord said, "I'm not going to send you any rain." It hasn't rained in Israel ... for 3½ years. And we think four weeks without much rain is bad! But despite the crushing drought, do Ahab and Jezebel repent of their sins and turn to God? No. They blame it all on Elijah.

So it's time for a showdown. The souls of God's people are at stake. Elijah tells King Ahab to summon all Israel and those 450 prophets of Baal to Mt. Carmel. When everyone is present, Elijah challenges the people: "*How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him*" (1 Kings 18:21). Come on, people, choose one or the other.

If Elijah were challenging us right now, how would he put it? "If a headlong pursuit of wealth at all costs is right and true, jump in

with both feet and leave the Lord out of it. Or if boredom is what you want to avoid, spend your energy to find excitement, and don't bother to slow down long enough to pray or consider your relationship with the Lord and where you'll spend eternity. But if the Lord is God, make him truly number one in your heart and mind and soul and life. This riding the fence, trying to have it both ways so you can keep your worldly friends, and then every once in a while pay attention to God's Word, it's ruining your faith in Jesus. Look at all the ways your life is out of sync with God."

Elijah proposes a simple contest. Both sides are to set up an altar with wood and a bull for a burnt offering, but they are not to light the fire. They are to call for fire from the sky to light the sacrifice. The God who sends down fire is the real God. The people say, "Yeah, we like this challenge" (see v. 24).

Elijah lets the 450 prophets of Baal go first. They pray long prayers, dance around their altar, and shout very loud: "O Baal, answer us!" They even cut themselves because they believe that Baal likes to see human blood flowing. This goes on from morning till about three in the afternoon. But there is no response from the sky. Baal doesn't exist outside of his worshipers' minds. And God doesn't listen to the prayers of unbelievers.

Now it's Elijah's turn. He doesn't even pray for fire. Instead he asks the Lord to lead the people to repentance. "Turn their hearts back to you, Lord."

When the Lord sends fire from above, the people shout: <sup>39</sup>"The LORD—He is God! The LORD—He is God!" Elijah replies, "Quick, grab those 450 prophets of Baal and let's give

them an early retirement" (see v. 40). The penalty for being a false prophet in Old Testament times was death.

When the Lord sends rain that afternoon, Elijah apparently thinks, "Okay! Now there will be a fantastic reform in Israel. After God's show of force on Mt Carmel, all the people, even Ahab and Jezebel, will set aside their idolatry and worship the Lord only."

But the next day Jezebel informs Elijah that she's taken a contract out on his life. Elijah flees, and makes his way to Mt Horeb, 300 miles, on foot. That's where the Lord had established His covenant with Moses and Israel—the covenant that is now in jeopardy again because the king and the queen still aren't ready to repent and change their lives.

You have to feel for Elijah. He has poured himself into his work. He has tried to lead his people back to their faithful covenant-Lord. After all his effort he has no results to show for it. If he were a business owner today, he would be forced into a going-out-of-business sale. He is so discouraged, he wants to die (19:4).

That's where our text starts. Elijah *went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah? Why did you run away? Who gave you the victory on Mt. Carmel? Have I suddenly become incapable of dealing with Jezebel's threat on your life? Why are you hiding away, nursing your despair? Why aren't you busy proclaiming my Word?"*

Elijah replies, <sup>10</sup>"I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your

*altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.* My preaching, my warnings, even your miracles have been a colossal waste of time. The queen wants me dead. Doesn't that justify my flight? Your way isn't working, Lord! It's no use preaching your Word. No one is listening. They aren't changing their ways. When I preach, they think my message is for someone else. They go right back to their lives as if they hadn't even heard what I said. If your people won't listen to your Word, what's the use. Let me die." And by implication Elijah is saying, "Lord, just let them go to hell. That's where they are headed anyway."

The Lord's prophet is faltering. He needs the Lord to strengthen him. The LORD tells Elijah, <sup>11</sup> "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup> After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Do you understand God's symbolic talk? Remember, Elijah seems to have expected a great religious renewal in Israel now that the Lord has exposed the worship of Baal as futile, and has vindicated Himself by sending fire from heaven. But God's mighty act on

Mt Carmel is just like the storm, the earthquake, and the fire that Elijah has experienced on Mt Horeb. It is not through judgments and exhibitions of power that God truly and fully reveals himself to us—reveals his merciful heart to us. Yes, he can reveal his hatred for all the rejection of Jesus as Savior by sending a pandemic, and when that's not enough to get people's attention, a hurricane, and when that's not enough to get people's attention, a straight line wind, and when that's not enough to get people's attention, a siege of lightning on a dry forest, and when that's not enough to get people's attention, two hurricanes on the same coast within 48 hours. God can easily send miraculous fire onto an altar to burn up a bull. He can easily send a storm, an earthquake, a fire. Through difficulties he can urge people to think about the evil they do.

But it's not through God's judgment that he wins us to faith, makes us his own dear children, or preserves us as Christians. That result comes about only through the "gentle whisper." What does Elijah do when he hears the gentle whisper? He hides his face. By this act of worship, he shows respect to the Lord, the same way we do when we settle into our pews here at church to listen to God's Word, or tune in at home.

What does the Lord gently whisper to Elijah? We don't know. My guess is that God whispers his name, "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love*" (Exodus 34:6). That's his name. His name is good news. His name is gospel. And the gospel about Jesus works wonders. It doesn't usually work fast. It definitely does not work like

any other power on earth. You can't be results-oriented when you lay God's Word on people's hearts. But the gospel does work in the hearts of those who listen. It brings us to repentance again and again, and leads us to trust the Lord for all that we need, especially the forgiveness of sins. On Mt. Horeb, the Lord is teaching Elijah, and he is teaching us now: trust the gospel. Pour the gospel into your own heart. Keep sharing the good news about Jesus with all the other hearts in your life, and then wait patiently for that gentle whisper to do its blessed work in those who heard you.

In other words, get back to work, all you Elijahs. Go use God's Word on people. Point out their sins, yes, otherwise they won't appreciate what the Lord redeems them from. But go get back to work. Lay my Word on their hearts. Accept that you might not see the fruits of your labor. Elijah himself will not get to witness the mass return of his people to the Lord. Elijah's ministry is almost at its end. But he still has work to do. Elijah is to take the steps which will loose God's judgment on Ahab and Israel. God will bring judgment on Israel through the new king of Aram, Hazael, and through the new King of Israel, Jehu, and through Elijah's successor, Elisha. There's going to be a storm of judgment, an earthquake of judgment, and a fire of judgment, just like Elijah has seen on Mt Horeb. Through them the Lord will communicate his anger over his people's unwillingness to repent of their sin. But the Lord will not be "in" those judgments, not in the sense that he is going to win the hearts of unbelievers back to himself through them. Changing hearts will be

accomplished only through the gentle whisper of the saving truth that God wants all sinners to repent and have eternal life through the Messiah, whom we now know as Jesus. Ah, but God's judgments do prepare the way for the message of his love, because when people are in trouble, they stop and ask, "What am I doing wrong? My way isn't working for me. I'm not getting the results I want." That's when they are ready to hear about all that God did for them through Jesus.

And in this way a small remnant of believers will be saved. The Lord reveals that there are 7000 believers in Israel that Elijah doesn't know about. Yes, that's a small number compared to the whole population at that time. But 7000 is more than Elijah has seen. The gentle whisper of Elijah's ministry has not been in vain. The gospel has been working.

That's what we need at St John's. We aren't as big as we once were. We can see that trouble comes even to churches where God's Word is proclaimed. We can also see that the world's way of thinking does not lead us closer to the Lord or strengthen our faith. We might become more "spiritual" following other paths, but those paths won't lead us closer to Jesus. Only the gentle whisper of God's Word leads a congregation to be stronger and to grow in numbers, if God wills us to grow. The growing is his business. Sharing the good news about Jesus is ours. **THE GOSPEL WORKS. LET'S USE IT.**