

Getting from the altars of ancient Israel to the Lord's table at Morningside Presbyterian Church is not going to be a direct flight. But we can get there, I promise you.

We're going to begin, though with a vocabulary and pronunciation lesson. In the new Book of Order, all of us who were ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament have been restyled as "teaching elders." I'm not much of a fan of the term, myself, but it does imply that perhaps I have something to teach, and after a conversation with Walter this week, I feel empowered to teach on the matter of pronunciation.

You will frequently hear the "god" of this stranger story of Elijah referred to as Bail, as in what we do to get out of jail. Walter reminds us it is two syllables. Bay-all. Optimally, it's Ba'al, with an apostrophe in the middle, but we'll take what we can get. We'll even settle for Bay-yule.

If all of these sound exactly the same to you, that's fine, but just remember, two syllables. Should you wind up in a casual conversation this week about the catch-all term that refers to the idols representing the gods of rainfall in ancient Israel, I wouldn't want you to sound ignorant, so let's just start with correct ancient Hebrew diction. If you really want to be southern, it can be four syllables, but not one.

This is a strange and ancient text, but it is not a hard text to understand.

It is easy to look at this text and to assume a few wrong things: that God can be proven, or that God requires our acknowledgement before favor will be shown – but at its heart this is a passage about a God who acts – as opposed to an idol who sits there. And because the difference between them is so stark, this is a text about a choice.

There was a modestly successful movie in 1955 entitled, “A Man Called Peter.” It was the screen adaptation of the biography of the later Peter Marshall by his widow, Catherine. Dr. Marshall was for many years the pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington DC and the chaplain to the United States Senate. It is a sentimental film – frankly, a rather starry-eyed view of the life of a minister, but it is marked throughout by choices that Dr. Marshall made through his life in key moments. It begins with a foggy night in Scotland where he has failed his examinations at the technical college in Glasgow. Throwing away his books, he set off across an unknown way home and hears a voice through the fog. Then, stumbling over a tree stump in his path he falls to the ground. As he reaches out his hands to push himself off the ground, he encounters only air and realizes that he has narrowly missed walking off a cliff into a quarry. His brush with death pushes him to make a choice has avoided – to leave his native land and come to the United States to pursue a calling to ministry.

Much later in the film there is a sequence in which Dr. Marshall is preaching on this text of the showdown between the prophets of Ba’al and Elijah and he presents the calling of God as a stark choice: If the Lord is God, follow him. If Ba’al is God, then follow him. And then he adds the codicil: “and go to hell.” He slams the Bible shut and sits down from the pulpit.

Personally, I’ve never quite been able to pull off such a rhetorical flourish, but he’s right: the choice is clear.

Now, if you’ve listened to me preach any at all you know I don’t believe that God ever closes the book on us like that. I don’t see the Gospel as “choose this, or go to hell.”

God’s redemptive activity and Jesus’ saving death are far more powerful and mysterious

than any sort of black and white statement of “turn or burn” will allow. We can come to God only because God has already come to us – if I never make another point that you hear, know that the living God is a god of grace and mercy and endless second chances. But make no mistake about it, the Gospel presents us with a choice.

And the choice is laid out by Elijah in 1 Kings.

King Ahab has engineered a show-down.

In the spirit of full-disclosure, King Ahab rarely engineered anything – it was usually his wife who did the engineering. You may have heard of her – her name was Jezebel.

To say that Jezebel and Elijah’s relationship was less than warm is an understatement – it was white-hot, with hatred. Their interactions tended to end with statements like, “If it kills me, I’m going to kill you,” or “the dogs are going to lick up your blood.”

Jezebel is a follower of Ba’al, and four hundred and fifty of her priests come to the showdown. It is a theological throw-down on a grand scale.

Now, all four hundred and fifty priests of Ba’al probably didn’t believe the same thing – they probably believed in 450 different gods. Ba’al is a catch-call name for the gods of rain or fertility or whatever; there were all kinds of different Ba’als in the ancient near east and they had specific rituals that were used to wake them up when needed.

The throw-down is staged thus: Elijah begins preaching: if the Lord is Ba’al, fine, follow him. But if the Lord is God, then follow God.

The people are silent. Nary a peep comes out.

So two altars are to be set and on each is placed a bull that has been sacrificed to their respective god – Ba’al gets one altar, and the Living God, the Holy one of Israel is given the other.

The people are desperately in need of rain – I suppose the odds of 450 to 1 must have seemed overwhelming.

The challenge is put: the sacrifice is set but not set aflame. The god who answers by fire will win the contest.

The priests of Ba'al go first. All day long they perform their rituals – were they of one voice? We don't know. Were they acting out 450 different antics in the hopes that one of them might find the right combination to waken their sleeping god? We don't know.

The Bible doesn't tell us – we only know that they danced and sweated and slashed at their skin with knives – because the Ba'als demanded that sort of thing to wake up – and all the while Elijah mocks them. “He can't HEAR you,” he taunts. “Scream louder,” he jibes them, “Perhaps Ba'al is indisposed... you'll have to holler harder if you want him to hear you from the toilet.”

Seriously, that's what the Hebrew said.

All day long they exhaust themselves, waiting for their God to answer by fire. And no fire comes.

Finally, when the times comes, Elijah repairs the altar of God which has been ignored too long. He places the bull on the wood, digs a trench, places stones to mark the 12 tribes of Israel, God's called and chosen people, and then has the people in the famine-racked, drought parched country to drench the altar with water.

They do it.

“Do it again,” he says to them.

They do it again. I guess when hope runs out you get ready to follow a different path.

“Do it again,” he says. And they do it a third time.

Finally, Elijah prays and fire rains from the sky and consumes the bull, the wood, the stones, even the ground beneath the altar.

Have you ever had that moment when something came into focus, where something that has been unclear becomes as transparent as crystal and you are struck by the realization? The people choose. “The LORD indeed is God!” they shout, “The LORD indeed is God!”

Let me tell you something: you’re following something. You have a guide-star in your life whether you know it or not, whether you acknowledge it or not.

And what you are following will determine where you are going.

If everything is going great, perhaps you’re following the right path. But if perhaps things need a change, a choice is in order.

This is a story about choice because at an elemental level we choose what we follow.

Not to choose is to make a choice.

It’s easy enough to perk along if things are going well, but what about when the wrong seems off’ so strong? Is God the ruler yet?

Here’s my problem when preachers glibly declare that you have a choice to make – there seems to be the implication that if you choose Jesus everything is going to work out just exactly right. That’s a sort of chummy approach to the Lord of the Universe, to my mind. Everything is not going to work out just perfectly well. I want to be clear on that. But if you are following Jesus, if you are following the holy one of Israel, you will know how to get where you’re going. If you follow the God who answers by fire, it may not be easy all the time but you’ll know where you’re going.

This is a text about choice, and it is a choice between an idol and a living God. You know what an idol is. It's a substitute. It's a fake. It's a talisman. Take your pick of terms, but here's what they'll all have in common: they are utterly powerless and completely useless. The only power an idol has is the power we give it. But the living God... that's another matter. The God who answers by fire is alive and is untamable, uncontainable, uncontrollable, undeniable. This God does not answer on demand and is not bound to what we expect because we aren't pulling the strings.

We like to pull the strings sometimes, don't we? We like to control outcomes in our lives, inasmuch as we can, don't we? I'm not ashamed to admit I like a little control, a little security now and again. It seems safer somehow.

There's a wonderful scene in "The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe" where the children are querying Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about the lion, Aslan, who represents God.

"Is he quite safe," Lucy asks?

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."

That is our God. Safety isn't promised. But goodness is... mercy is too, and grace is promised as well.

Oh, you can get from the altars of ancient Israel to the table, but only if you know who you're following. You really can get from anywhere to the table of the Lord, but only if you know who you're following.

But, I need to tell you something about this table – it's set by the God who answers by fire, so be forewarned.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.