

Holy Cross Lutheran Church
Adult Bible Study
September 26, 2021
Remaining Faithful in Unfaithful Times

Session 1

In 2020 the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada released the results of a large survey suggesting fully 50% of Canadians are either agnostic, atheist or unreligious; only 10% of Canadians attend services weekly. How does the church respond to this challenge? One of the places begin is by looking anew at the ministry of the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament. God called these two preachers to proclaim the Word in a time when only a very small minority of the population of Israel was faithful to God. It was frustrating, slow work, but God blessed it. This fall in Adult Bible Class we will examine God's work in the lives of Elijah and Elisha that we might be renewed in our faith to face a time when faith in the true God is on the decline.

Nothing New Under the Sun

As strange as our times feel to those who were brought up in a more "Christian" Canada, there have been other times in history where those with active faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit have been in a distinct minority. One such time was during the life of the people of Israel at around 875 BC. Let's take a step back in time:

In 874 BC a man named Ahab begins his 22 year reign king of Israel. Here is a quick summary of his service:

²⁹ In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. ³⁰ Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. ³¹ He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. ³² He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. ³³ Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him. – 1 Kings 16:29-33

Israel

Israel is the Northern kingdom of God's people, consisting of 10 of the 12 tribes of the Sons of Jacob. The kingdom split into Israel and Judah after the death of king Solomon. Israel was the less faithful of the two kingdoms and was eventually overrun by the Assyrians in 722 BC.

As goes the king, so goes the kingdom. The vast majority of the people of the nation of Israel followed their king. They took up the worship of Baal and the other false gods and abandoned in the true God. The Baal gods (there were several of them) were projections of the deep needs of the people. For example, the Baal that Ahab worshiped was a god of fertility. It was thought that Baal was the "rainmaker." In ancient Israel, the primary agricultural season was during the winter months. After the heat and dry season during the summer, the early rains came in the autumn to soften the parched and cracked ground. If these rains did not come, the ground was indeed like iron and could not be plowed. Springs and wells would not be refreshed. The latter rains fell in the spring, and these gave the crops the moisture needed to develop and flourish. If these rains did not come, the harvest was destroyed. The need for rain, led to the creation of a rain god.

This is our world too. In 2015 Angus Reid published a poll saying that 39% of Canadians identify as "spiritual but not religious" and that another 27% are neither spiritual nor religious. Many of these people look to the self for guidance, above all. They do not appeal to a sacred text, but rather look within for guidance. What their gut tells them, or what their intuition reveals, is what orients them. For this reason, several scholars have deemed it

"self-spirituality." Today's idol is not a statue, but our own "rights." Allowing individuals to be their authentic selves has become the highest good.

One writer concludes, "Self-spirituality is a form of religion very much at home in the socially liberal culture of Canada, and bound up with the rights revolution, which has arguably done more than anything else to define our national identity in the 21st century."

Later in the Old Testament the prophet Ezekiel sums it up this way:

"Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts..." Ezekiel 14:3

Elijah the Tishbite

Into this very pagan culture steps Elijah, the Tishbite and later Elisha, son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah as well as lesser-known prophets like Miciah, and Obadiah.

Elijah appears on the scene with surprising abruptness. He is introduced without any information about his prior life, without reference to his family or clan in Israel, and even his place of birth (Tishbe) is not known with confidence today. He is assigned no elaborate pedigree, whereby we could place him in the social register of ancient Israel, and no support group is mentioned for whom he could be considered the spokesman. He lived in Gilead, a peripheral area in ancient Israel, isolated across the Jordan. He had no fame or notoriety, no particular political clout, no credentials to command a hearing, no alphabet soup of academic degrees following his name. His seemingly humble beginnings remind us of another servant of the Lord, one who had "no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him," a man who was "despised and rejected" (Isa. 53:2–3), a man whose pedigree was also questioned (John 6:42; 8:39–41). Like the nation of Israel itself, God chose as his servants "not many . . . [who] were wise by human standards, not many . . . [who] were influential, not many [who] were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26–28).

Elijah (whose name means "The LORD is my God") will point us to the God who truly fills the desires of our hearts and who provides for our every need!

At the Kerith Ravine

Elijah's ministry begins with a meeting between himself and the king.

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." 1 Kings 17:1

Whether he realized it or not, this was bad news for King Ahab. As the king he was also the spiritual father of the nation and the one most responsible for its religious life. He was seen as the representative of the deity. Thus, he was responsible to ensure there was rain. Just as we look to our leaders to ensure a flourishing economy, the Israelites looked to Ahab to ensure the Baal would bring rain on their lands. Ahab and the people are about to learn how powerless their God really is.

For his part Elijah is directed to the "seminary" at Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. Here he will see first hand who it is that really provides for his needs. The Lord promises ravens will feed him morning and night and this is indeed what happens.

⁶ *The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.* – 1 Kings 17:6

For us, too, in a dry and thirsty world, the Lord has spread a table of food and drink,

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

with instructions that we also must flee from idolatry.

¹⁴ Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.” 1 Corinthians 10:4–17.

God’s grace was new for the prophet each morning

Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.

²³ They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴ I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him.” Lamentations 3:22–24

Although the brook Cherith would eventually diminish and run dry, Jesus has opened for us a well that will never run dry.

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” ³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. John 7:37–39.