

Showdown at the Mount Carmel Corral

1 Kings 18:20-39

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 7:1-10

May 2, 2013

Pentecost 2C

On my trips to and from Crossroads, when I travel by myself, I have the companionship of audio books from the St Louis County Library. I listen to all kinds—mysteries, history, biographies, religion, fiction, historical fiction, science fiction, etc. I always enjoy Louis L'Amour and his western novels and short stories. Of course, they are filled with heroes and good guys, beautiful and spirited women, and a passel of bad guys. Of course, like Shane, High Noon, and lots of other western movies, L'Amour's stories usually build up to the final showdown, the shootout, between the good guy and the chief bad guy, and guess who wins?

So now you know what inspired my sermon title. Of course, Mount Carmel isn't in Wyoming or Arizona, it's in Israel, jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea. And the showdown wasn't a shootout, because they didn't have 6-shooters then, but, rather a pray-out. But more about that later.

My sermons over the next month or so month are going to be a little bit different. Each week, we're going to be looking at a story about the prophet Elijah, the greatest prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures if you don't count Moses, and Jesus, our prophet, Lord, and Messiah. The stories all have some neat parallel themes, and you'll enjoy the interplay between stories about two great men who lived nine centuries apart. Jesus knew the stories of Elijah, and people of his time were expecting that when God's time, the Day of the Lord, the time the Messiah would come, that Elijah would return from heaven to usher in that golden age.

First, some brief historical context. You all remember how Moses led the people to freedom from the Egyptians, and through the wilderness, and how he gave them the law. Then, a generation later, Joshua led them into the Promised Land, the Land of Milk and Honey. Israel wasn't a nation then, but a group of tribes living among and fighting with other nations and cultures that already lived there. After Joshua died, came the time of the Judges. When crises would come, the scattered tribes would rally when God sent them a leader to defeat whichever enemy was harassing them. The prophet Samuel was the spiritual leader of the people, and he reluctantly gave in to their desire to have a king. So they united as a nation under Saul, then the great warrior shepherd king David, then the wise Solomon. But tensions grew and the kingdom divided between 2 southern tribes, Judah, and the ten northern tribes, Israel. Most of the time, the kings tried to outdo each other in wickedness. One custom almost always led to trouble. When a king would ally with a neighboring kingdom, the alliance would often be sealed by a marriage to a princess from the other kingdom. And so it was that King

Ahab married Jezebel. (Many of us are old enough to remember Frankie Layne singing "If ever the devil was born without a pair of horns, it was you, Jezebel it was you.") Jezebel was a devout and convinced worshiper of Baal. Baal was the chief god of the Philistines and other tribes and nations. Baal, and his consort Ashtarte, were fertility gods, and their specialty was in bringing good crops. Often, worship of these gods involved sex between believers and temple prostitutes, with the idea that the sex act magically gave the crops fertility, too. You can see why loyal Hebrews would be shocked, and wavering Hebrews intrigued. Good crops and sex—a tempting combination.

But it didn't work. Elijah the prophet could tell you why. Because Baal wasn't real, and Yahweh, God of the Israelites, was. Baal had no real power, and Yahweh, God of the Israelites, had ultimate power. But who would listen? Baal had the queen, and hence the king, and hence the army, and hence all the priests of Baal, and a lot of public opinion on his side. So who would believe Elijah's call to return to the God of Israel?

So Elijah set up an object lesson. Baal was supposed to help the crops grow, but he has trouble with that when Yahweh sends a drought and a famine in the land. So one day when King Ahab saw Elijah, he asked, "Is that you, troubler of Israel?" and Elijah said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals." So Elijah challenges Ahab to a showdown: All Israel can come to Mount Carmel and watch a contest between 450 prophets of Baal and 450 prophets of Asherah on one side, and one prophet of Yahweh on the other—900 to 1 odds. May the best God win.

After the people gather, Elijah challenges them to make a decision. "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people said nothing.

So the showdown is this. Elijah calls for the carcasses of two bulls to be offered for sacrifice, with the meat laid upon a pile of wood. Then, he challenged, let your god or mine light the fire.

The Baal worshipers went first, crying out, "O Baal, answer us!" But no answer. They danced a limping dance, bowing before the altar; but no answer. They cried, they danced, no answer. The hours went by.

At noon, high noon, Elijah mocked them. "Cry louder! Perhaps he's meditating, or has wandered away!" Scholars think that it might be a euphemism suggesting that the Baal has gone to the bathroom. And so the priests cut themselves and danced, and raved, and chanted, but no answer.

So Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Israel, to remind Israel of its past devotion, and formed them into a small altar. He put a trench around the altar and laid the firewood and put the sacrificial meat on

top. Then he upped the ante. "Pour four jugs of water on my firewood. Pour another four. Drench it. Drench it again." He prayed a short and simple prayer, and fire came from heaven like a lightning strike and wiped out the entire altar. After our scripture reading, Elijah challenged the crowd to turn against the priests of Baal, and they did. Then Elijah showed the King a cloud off in the distance, a cloud that would grow into a storm which would end the drought. God—and Elijah won. Elijah turned the people against the priests and prophets of Baal, and many were killed. This didn't go over well with the King and Queen of Israel, and we will hear more of that story in the next few weeks.

Now with the Gospel reading from Luke 7, there's no showdown, no conflict, no fire from the sky, no cast of thousands. Instead, it's a story of a one-on-one encounter between a Jewish healer and teacher and a Roman centurion. A centurion was the highest-ranked noncommissioned officer in the Roman army, like a staff sergeant or gunnery sergeant today, in charge of a unit of 80 men. They were the backbone of the Roman army. This particular centurion had a dying servant whom he valued highly, and he wanted Jesus to heal him. The soldier brought along a Jewish friend who gives him a good reference. "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people and it is he who built our synagogue for us." Jesus started to go with the centurion to his home, but the centurion said the most remarkable thing. "Lord, do not come into my house, for I'm unworthy. Just speak the word that will heal my servant. I am also a man who has people answer to me, and who answers to others." Well, you get the impression that Jesus was seldom surprised, but now he was astonished—amazed—at the faith of this soldier. Here, a gentile had faith—he just knew that Jesus could and would heal his servant. In the eyes of the world, the slave was a nobody. To the Jews he was a gentile. To people with power he was a slave. To the healthy he was sick. Why should anybody care? Why should Jesus act? Because Jesus and the centurion both knew that nobody is a nobody to God.

So Jesus healed because he responded to the power of a gentile soldier's faith and commitment. We are heirs to that faith. It's a faith that reaches out. It's a faith that takes risks in order to help a friend. It's a faith that's built upon trust in God and Christ. When we pray for others, whether together on Sunday morning, or in our own moments of prayer, we're letting the love and power of Jesus Christ enter those situations. When we reach out in love and compassion to let healing happen to hurting people, Jesus is smiling at us. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon