



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Getting God's Attention
A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

June 6, 2010
Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

1 Kings 18:20-40

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So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty. Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." All the people answered, "Well spoken!" Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it." So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked 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." Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response. Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me"; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name"; with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time, so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water. At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "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." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the

water that was in the trench.⁹ When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.”

This is the word of the Lord; Thanks be to God!

Growing up where I did in Lakewood, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, I was fortunate to live in a neighborhood with lots of children around my age. One such family lived across the street. The Zucholds had three children: Catherine, Christina and Walter. They were one year apart in age and I fell right in the middle of all of them.

Each year the Zucholds went camping. Typically they went to kid-friendly campgrounds with exciting places to visit not too far away. Stories from places like: the Blue Hole or Safari Land, and one year *Disney World* were brought back to my eager ears after these family vacations. Camping sounded like so much fun – I just had to go.

I tried to get my family to take a camping trip. However, my father was a veteran of World War II and told me he’d had all the camping experience he intended to have in the trenches of France during those hard years. Even as a child, I couldn’t argue his point and went on to *Plan B*.

Before the camping trip, Mr. Zuchold diligently set up the family tent. It was a wonderful tent: roomy enough for all five family members and made of that heavy green canvas from days gone by! He aired out the tent for several days during which the kids would ‘play’ campout in their backyard. Occasionally they were allowed to invite a friend to join them for an overnight backyard adventure. I was sure that was the only chance I’d have to experience camping – and I longed to be one of the lucky few invited into that sacred space.

As the tent was set-up and I heard my friends talking about sleeping in it, I began to drop some not so subtle hints that I could join them. I tried everything to get their attention, short of showing up at night with the new sleeping bag I had somehow convinced my mother I had to have *right away*. I hinted; I talked campout; I pouted; I made noises about how fun camping **MUST** be and poor ME, for having a family that didn’t camp; and I told them all about my new sleeping bag!

Until, at last, success! I was ‘invited’ to spend the night in their tent. And, as you might imagine - our backyard campout was fun. But as I look back on those summer days my memories have much more to do about my behavior before the campout, than the campout itself. I am struck by the lengths to which I went, shamelessly, to get my friends’ attention.

That being said, within all of us there is that need to be noticed, attended to, cared about, ‘invited in’ to whatever sacred space is before us at any given time. A backyard campout, a school club, a new and better job, the right college or *the right* group. Many years ago when my children were small and learning to swim, I sat with a mother from the church I

was serving at the time. She also had a child in swimming lessons and we were watching their progress from the deck. She'd been there before with her children who were mostly older than mine and was telling me about her experience with the other mothers. She described how they all 'stood together,' talking and laughing, seemingly unaware of her presence. They didn't open a space to include her, never noticed her child's struggles or successes even as they commented on each other's and didn't offer any encouraging glances her way. It was as if she wasn't there. Never one to bring attention to herself, she shied away and watched from a distance. Yet her story remains with me all still. It continues to remind me of how powerful that need to belong is within us – wherever we find ourselves.

In what might be called a strange irony, as shy as this mother was about doing anything that would make herself stand out we live in a time when it's become very chic to call attention to ourselves – to stand apart – our uniqueness shining brightly. The number of reality shows on television these days tells us that as a society we have embraced this privately AND publicly - often in ways that are disturbing. We have been invited in to what many of us would call private space, as the cameras focus on the disintegrating relationship of *John and Kate*, the private lives of guests on *Jerry Springer's* talk show or *The Kardashians* family dynamics. And who can forget last winter's news story about the 'balloon boy'. We were drawn in only to learn later it was an attention-getting hoax set-up by his parents. The examples are seemingly endless when we add in the day to day things we all see and do, but don't make the news.

It is this need - even, at times, a sense of desperation - for some a quiet experience, for others not quiet at all, that is at the heart of our passage today in this contest between the Prophets of Baal and Elijah.

Elijah, a prophet of God, has called the people of God to a time of decision. Under the political leadership of Ahab, they had come to know and worship Baal – 'weather god'. And, because Israel was in the late days of a long and severe drought, it took little encouragement for the people to pay attention to and worship a god who *they thought* controlled the rain.

While Ahab was King, Baal worship flourished. Yet, it's also clear from Elijah's opening words that the people's loyalty wavered, *limping* along with devotion that shifted from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Baal, then back again. Wherever their needs were met, the people's devotion could be found.

Elijah set the stage for a contest with his bold indictment of this behavior: the time for decision had indeed come. A contest would be held to prove which God truly cared. Now the people had nothing to say when Elijah confronted them head on about their 'limping faithfulness.' But when he announced the contest, they readily agreed to the event and cried out: 'Well spoken!'

450 prophets prepared an offering to Baal and then for hours they cried out imploring him to make himself known by bringing fire on the offering. They chanted, cried, danced and eventually, in seeming desperation, even mutilated themselves to get Baal's attention. But through it all their god was silent and absent.

Then it was Elijah's turn. Attending to the altar that had been thrown down, he orchestrated its rebuilding using twelve stones, a reminder of the twelve tribes of Israel. A trench was dug around the altar; wood was placed with the offering on top: all standard preparations. But then Elijah did something no one expected: he ordered four stone jars filled with water and poured on the offering. Not once, not twice, but three times; twelve jars of water were thrown onto an offering that was to be burned.

You can imagine what people were thinking about this. Elijah already had a reputation for being one of the more eccentric prophets; his clothing and behavior were distinctive and his methods could be very unorthodox. But beyond that people were likely confused and angry. Remember: they were three years into a severe drought; watching jar after jar of precious water poured in preparation for a burnt offering was more than counterintuitive – it was downright scandalous.

What this passage doesn't tell us is that God had already attended to their desperate need for water; early in this chapter God told Elijah that the drought would soon end. *Elijah's contest plan, ostensibly to catch God's attention was really to get the attention of Israel in the throes of desperate times.* They, like we, longed to know they meant something; that there was something to hold onto when bit by bit they were losing hope; they needed to be reminded that God loved them still – that they had God's attention. In the absence of that conviction, their faithfulness did, indeed, waver back and forth in a way that left them unsatisfied and lost.

This need - this longing that is fundamental to who we are, is a timeless one and begs the question: how does our toil to fulfill that need move us away from seeing how God is reaching out to us? Are we on a seemingly never ending frenzy to do everything: taking the kids to dance, getting home to make dinner and then running off to a meeting at church (not that I want to discourage you from that last one); working from home early in the morning, late at night and at the office through the day; agreeing to every request for help that comes our way? Or are we keeping a tenacious grip on a personal stand or conviction that keeps us from hearing the 'still, small voice' through which God often speaks? Or perhaps it's a longing to keep everyone happy and so our loyalties 'limp' along as did Israel's never landing firmly in anything that is meaningful and life giving.

The truth is that while Israel was 'limping along' God was still at work, intimately involved in their lives, watching out and leading them through Elijah. What they were seeking, they already had: a community, a place of belonging – a God who would go to great lengths to show them how much they were loved.

This truth is ours as well. As we move through our days, looking for meaning in our efforts to do things or become better or different than we are, the God of Israel is with us, working in and around and through us. This is the God to whom we already belong; nothing we do will make that more or less true. This is Yahweh, the *God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*, the God who sends Elijah to get the Israelite's attention; this is the God who is the author of our Easter claim that the Lord is Risen signs of resurrection abound.

Indeed, this is the God whose faithfulness to us never wavers.

Let us pray...

God of Life,

Where we are restless and struggling for meaning, make yourself known to us in bold ways. Remind us of your love, strength and power when our search threatens to move us away from you.

Help our restless hearts find their rest in you.

Amen.