

## ***The First Commandment: Limping Between Two Opinions***

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This morning we read the introduction to one of the most fascinating legends in the Old Testament, the legend of Elijah's encounter with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. Let me give you the *Cole Notes* version of the rest of the story.

Once upon a time, a huge drought fell upon the land of Israel. It lasted for three years. Elijah, God's last great prophet in the land, said that the drought was God's punishment upon the Israelites for the sins of their king, Ahab, and his wife, Jezebel. Those sins were more than the sins of all the kings of Israel before him. They included the official worship of Baal in the royal court, instead of Israel's traditional God, Yahweh; and even child sacrifice.

The drought did not bring Ahab to his senses. So Elijah suggested a contest. Elijah invited 450 priests of Baal to build an altar on Mount Carmel, and to place a bull on it. Then Baal's priests would ask Baal to send fire from heaven. This would prove that Baal was a pretty fantastic God.

The priests of Baal agreed. They prepared an altar. They slaughtered a bull and laid it on. Then they danced so long before the altar that they were finally reduced to limping. They cut themselves with knives because Baal loved gifts of blood. And the 450 priests prayed for fire from heaven. Baal was the Storm God of lightning and thunder. It should have been easy for Baal. But the fire from heaven never came.

When it was Elijah's turn to call upon his God, Yahweh, he decided to make the trick a bit more difficult. So Elijah inundated his sacrificial bull with water. Elijah then flooded the altar and a ditch around the altar. Finally, he prayed. Yahweh's heavenly fire not only burned up the bull, but also the wood, the stones, and even the water. The people watching this contest were so impressed that they killed all of Baal's 450 prophets. And then God ended the three-year drought with rain.

At first glance, this story is a perfect one for illustrating the wisdom of obeying the middle clause of the first command, ". . . you shall have no other gods . . ." However, if we reduce the first command to just these words, and forget the words "before me," and the ones about Egypt and slavery that you see on your screens, we'll miss the major thrust of this command. In fact, the first command—and ultimately the contest between Baal and Yahweh on Mount Carmel—the first command is not just or even mostly about making a simple choice between Baal or Yahweh—it is, rather, about making a choice about the vision for life that those two Gods represented.

In fact, the contest on Mount Carmel was actually a family feud between two related Gods, a father and a son, Yahweh and Baal. Ancient connections between the Canaanites and Israelites, who were both Semitic peoples, tied the religion of Yahweh and Baal together. According to their ancient shared religion Yahweh, also known by both peoples as El, was the ancient and powerful father of Baal. In fact, Baal was part of a large divine family that included siblings Yam (the sea),

and Mot (death), all children of El worshipped by the Canaanites. The Canaanite's El was often portrayed in idols as a calf or bull.

Similarly, when the people of Israel wanted to make a statue or idol representing Yahweh—which they did at Mount Sinai when Moses was getting the ten commandments, or in the other Israelite temple city of Samaria—they made that idol in the shape of golden bulls or calves.

In any case, it was this father God, known in scripture as El or Yahweh, that the Israelites mostly worshipped—though throughout their history the Israelites rarely worshipped him without at least nodding in the direction of Baal and his siblings too.

Yahweh and the father of Baal were one and the same God in the prehistoric religion the Jews and Canaanites shared. In a similar way today we can trace the roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all to the God of Abraham.

What happened, over time, in ancient Israel was that the Israelites increasingly focused their worship on the father of Baal, El, ignoring the rest of Baal's family. And eventually, perhaps because of their legends of Moses and liberation from slavery, they became monotheists who worshipped only El, or Yahweh—both names are common in the Old Testament—because this God was believed to be their liberator from Egypt. The Canaanites, on the other hand, more and more worshipped Father El's children, including Baal, and many others.

It is in this context that we ought to understand the words, "You shall worship no other gods 'before me.'" The command does not actually say the Israelites should not ever worship other gods; rather it says that the Israelites should worship no other gods, "before me." Yahweh was to be their cornerstone god.

Besides the words, "before me," the first command says that, "I am the LORD your God *who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" Why mention Egypt and slavery in a command about who to worship?

Well, because the God of Israel was utterly unlike nearly every other ancient near-eastern God, including Baal. The God of Israel was a moral God who responded to the cries of agony that slaves in Egypt made, a God who picked the least and last and smallest nation, Israel, to be his light to the nations, when they were in exile. Yahweh was a God who empathized with people. Yahweh insisted, strangely, on social justice. According to Yahweh's laws, the rich had to leave gleanings in the field so that the poor could eat. God insisted that refugees would find a warm welcome in Israel's cities. God insisted that true worship was not a matter of bloody sacrifices, which Isaiah says God actually hated. No, for Yahweh, true worship required doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.

And in this the children of El, Baal and his siblings, were completely different. For in Baal religion the emphasis was not on ideals of moral behaviour, but on somehow convincing reluctant gods to give you what you most wanted—good crops, rain, children, riches, and victory at war. You did so by contributing to Baal's temples and sacrificing animals. This appealed to Baal's vanity.

In fact, according to Canaanite myths, Baal and his siblings didn't really care about people at all. In the Canaanite creation story, the reason that people were created was to relieve the gods of the tedium of having to work in the primeval garden. People were created as slaves—unlike Adam and Eve, who according to the Israelite story, were created to rule that garden and make it flourish for their own benefit. In the Canaanite flood story, the gods killed the people with a flood because people made too much noise, so much that the gods couldn't get any sleep. In the Israelite flood story, on the other hand, the flood was god's punishment for sin, for human moral lapses.

So, as the words "before me" suggest, the first command is not so much about getting the number of gods or the name of god correct in some sort of abstract "Doctrine of God," theology test. It isn't even about saying that there is no Baal or Yam or Mot. Rather, the first command is about understanding and adopting the unique character of God before all things. The Jewish God Yahweh, unlike the selfish and violent gods of the Canaanites was a moral god who wanted his people to follow his priorities, to live good and just lives suggested by the ten commandments, hence this one first. So how did one worship God?

By refusing to engage in child sacrifices. By not stealing the property of unfortunate neighbours—as King Ahab will steal the pretty vineyard of Nabel in the next chapter, a sin described there to illustrate that he still follows Baal's values rather than Yahweh's, and for which he will lose the throne. How does one not worship other Gods before Yahweh? By showing the same liberating, compassionate care for others that God showed the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt. In sum, what does the first command demand of the Jews and us? That we, like our number one God, whatever else we think about God, do justice and love mercy.

We, at root, should be committed to the first commandment not as a statement about how there is or isn't a god in the cosmos. We should, rather, be committed to the first commandment in the sense that as our favourite God liberates, as our favourite God has a history of showing compassion to the least and the last, so should we.

It's what we try to do here, at LPCC. We support lots of just causes out of this congregation, like welcoming refugees, sharing from our wealth with the poor, like creating a supportive and caring community for each other, and like using our careers and pastimes not just to get ahead and have fun, but to make a positive impact on our society and nation as a whole. Amen to all that.

But the flip side of that is that what we believe about God as one or many, or perhaps even as none, like Gretta Vosper; what we believe when it comes to the doctrine of God as found in creeds and confessions, what we believe about the Trinity or Jesus' divine and human natures and what we believe about the Holy Spirit's essence isn't nearly as important to God as whether or not we try to imitate God, and imitate the one that god chose to teach us how—Jesus Christ.

The first command is about prioritizing liberation and compassion, justice and mercy. That's putting what really matters about God before all else, rather than limping between two opinions.