

Tired of Hopping
By Rev. Todd Farnsworth
1 Kings 18: 17-27



*17 When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"***18** *"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. 19 Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."***20** *So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. 21 Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. 22 Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. 23 Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. 24 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—he is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good." 25 Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of*

you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” 26 So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. 27 At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”

The great prophet of Israel, Elijah, had been in hiding for three years. He was afraid of the king (who was looking to destroy him for preaching about God) and in Elijah’s absence the people had been experiencing a drought. They attributed the failure of their crops to various deities. In particular they came down on a god called Ba’al and our God, YHWH. For those of you unfamiliar with Ba’al, he was a Canaanite deity, old school. He was often represented as a bull to indicate his strength, his power, and there is evidence that suggests that he is the one that the people of Israel made a golden statue of after receiving the 10 Commandments.

Elijah had been in hiding but today we see him appearing before King Ahab, who is known as one of the worst kings in Israel’s history. Ahab is considered one of the worst because he welcomed the prophets of Ba’al into his court at the behest of his wife, Queen Jezebel. Ahab brought over 450 prophets of Ba’al into his court and they enjoyed the opulent life of living alongside the king and queen. The prophets told the king what he wanted to hear because, well, job security. They prayed for his victories

over real and perceived enemies. They blamed others for things that went wrong within the realm. They staged elaborate ceremonies to Ba'al in an effort to appease the god and right the wrongs that were happening throughout the kingdom.

One wrong they were unable to get on top of (among many) was the drought. The farming community was crying for relief. There was famine and economic instability brought on by the lack of water to grow things with. It was a tough time.

Which brings us to today's reading that begins with the king blaming Elijah for the drought.

When he saw Elijah, (King Ahab) said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"¹⁸ "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals.

Elijah appears in Ahab's court at God's call to come out of hiding. It is a risky move, but Elijah trusts YHWH to offer protection. YHWH has seen the suffering of the people and hopes that this moment might turn things around.

Now, I know folks get the idea that the God of the Old Testament is pretty mean and vengeful. I encourage you to take this story as a counter argument. In this story, God is trying to woo the people away from false worship. God is asking the people to trust like Elijah trusts. God is asking the people to choose YHWH over their false gods.

Elijah acts as God's mouthpiece and goes to the people, suggesting a contest.

- There are to be two altars built out in the public (on Mount Carmel) where everyone can see: one to Ba'al and one to YHWH.
- A bull is to be sacrificed and placed on each altar and each deity will have an opportunity to cook dinner.
- The one that brings the fire, wins.

Simple. And the 450 prophets of Ba'al agree to the contest. And the people agree to the contest. It turns out that the people have been so overwhelmed by the mayhem the prophets of Ba'al have been causing in the court that they don't know who to believe. They know who they should believe (YHWH) but 450 prophets who have the king's ear can be pretty convincing after awhile. Elijah does not condemn them for their wavering, but he invites them to reconsider their choices. He goes to the people and says, " *How long will you waver between two opinions?*" "How long will you limp with two opinions? How long will you hop between two opinions? Straddle the issue? Sit on the fence? Hop between two branches?" I confess I like the imagery in that last translation from Hebrew. It suggests a person hopping like a bird between two branches, or a person hobbling with crutches made of branches. These images certainly capture how I feel when I am torn between God and doing something that seems...easier...more tangible.

- When I choose to avoid doing things I fear rather than serve God I am a hopper.

- When I think about skipping some responsibility I have to care for people who are vulnerable because it takes a lot of effort I can sometimes straddle the issue.
- When I find myself blaming others for the problems I am facing rather than calling on God for help and wisdom I feel like I am a bird jumping between two branches. It's a tenuous position. Perhaps you've found yourself there once or twice, out on a limb.

Elijah invites us in from the limb. *If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.*"

Elijah offers us the option of coming back to the secure position of our God and as the contest unfolds, he points out the folly of following the Ba'als.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. 27 At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened."

As you might guess, the contest does not go well for the Ba'als. Nothing happens for them and they are publicly shamed for following their false deity. YHWH appears at Elijah's invitation to demonstrate godliness so that the people's faith will be restored. Fire falls from the sky. The bull is consumed. The people fall to the ground and worship YHWH. Their hopping has ended. They have made their choice...for now.

For those of us who are tired of hopping back and forth, it might be some solace to remember that we have a story that takes Elijah's contest a bit further. We have the story of Jesus who, even after demonstrating the wonders of God's love, is rejected by the people. And instead of waiting for us to choose him, Jesus is so intent on loving us that he chooses us. He declares his love for us by rising up to new life and including us in that story so that if/when we find ourselves hopping we can always find rest in his care.

Today we recall the names of those who have landed in the eternal rest of Jesus' love. It is a gift promised to all of us but these folks have now come to know it fully, even as they are fully known. They are the true witnesses to the overcoming of Ba'als. Their love burns on in the new life that Jesus has in place for all of us. As I read their names, I invite you to respond to each name with the affirmation: *Chosen by Jesus*.

Names...chosen by Jesus.

If the daily news of the Ba'al has you tired of hopping and wondering where you can land, look to these saints from our lives and recall that like them, you are chosen by Jesus...no contest. God wins. Amen.

