

Prayer for Illumination:

There is one gospel only, one divine gospel. Let us eat this word this morning and be transformed more into the likeness of God. Amen.

Scripture:

1 Kings 18:20-21, (22-29),30-40

Elijah's Triumph over the Priests of Baal

20 So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. 21 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. 22 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. 23 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. 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 is indeed God." All the people answered, "Well spoken!" 25 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." 26 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. 27 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." 28 Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. 29 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.

30 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; 31 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"; 32 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. 33 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." 34 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, 35 so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

36 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. 37 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." 38 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. 39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God." 40 Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

Galatians 1:1-12

To the churches of Galatia:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

There Is No Other Gospel

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

10 Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Today's Message:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Choices – life is all about choices. The choices we make determine who we are, and in a large part determine our life path. At Noah’s karate school they have a creed that sounds something like ‘Our choices become our actions, our actions become our habits, and our habits become our character, our characters become our virtues, and our virtues become our destiny. It’s a little hokey, but the point is clear. The decisions we make matter.

However – not all decisions have the same value or importance. Some decisions are much more important than others – but identifying those important decisions is getting harder and harder.

Our consumer culture is all about choice – about making us feel important about the choices we make. Sometimes those choices can seem pretty intimidating. I don’t know about you, but if I ever go to a Starbucks I order a tall dark roast, or if it’s early in the morning a light roast since that has more caffeine. I don’t have to learn a new language to order that drink – it’s easy, and it’s what I want – a coffee. I know what I don’t want when I go to Starbucks, and that would be to spend half an hour reading the menu.

I went to the Starbucks website just to have a look and found all the drinks that you can order that are made from espresso – keep in mind this isn’t the whole drink menu – just the espresso section:

Flat white, skinny peppermint mocha, caffe Americano, caffe latte, caffe mocha, skinny mocha, cappuccino, caramel macchiato, espresso, espresso con panna, espresso macchiato, flavoured latte, iced caffe Americano, iced caffe latte, iced caffe mocha, iced skinny mocha, iced maramel macchiato, iced flavoured latte, iced skinny flavoured latte, skinny flavoured latte, white chocolate mocha, cinnamon dolce latte, iced cinnamon dolce latte, iced peppermint mocha, iced pepperming whte chocolate mocha, iced skinny latte, iced white chocolate mocha, peppermint white chocolate mocha, skinny cinnamon dolce latte, toffee mocha, vanilla latte, iced vanilla latte, and finally of course is the latte macchiato. (34)

Overwhelming. And dare I also say – ridiculous. The amount of mental energy required to simply order a coffee is more than the energy I’m going to get from the drink, even with all that caffeine. Even at the grocery store checkout I am faced with a litany of questions – do I have air miles, would I like to give them an email address for coupons, what’s my postal code, would I like to add a dollar for the charity of the day. I can’t even buy a bag of milk without having to make a whole pile of secondary decisions.

On the surface, we may think that all this choice is good – that it means that we are a free people, in control of our destinies – large and in charge. And that is what we are supposed to think. But in fact the truth is quite different.

The number of choices that we have to make each day is actually overwhelming – it is mindboggling and it is numbing. This onslaught of choice actually limits us, at best it’s a distraction, at worst it paralyzes us.

We’ve made the simple act of ordering a coffee a complicated and heart-wrenching affair. Now, when these simple decisions become so complicated how do we differentiate the minor decisions from the major ones? When picking a coffee takes as much effort as choosing a mortgage, or electing a premier, then it gets very easy to just disengage – we just begin ticking off checkboxes because we don’t have the energy anymore to make another decision.

Over-choice renders all choice meaningless – I can no longer tell the important things from the trivial – I just want to be left alone. This is so very dangerous. The type of coffee I drink has zero impact on the rest of my life – but there are other decisions I must make that impact eternity.

Elijah had such a decision to make. After delivering a prophecy to King Ahab that there will be no rain because Ahab was leading the land of Israel into sin, Elijah was on the run, and King Ahab and Queen Jezebel had been killing off all the other prophets of God that they could find. Elijah was a hunted man and yet he came out of hiding in a dramatic fashion for this mountaintop showdown with the 450 priests of Baal.

Elijah’s decision - Elijah’s stand - showed a total commitment to God – he put his life on the line. I can’t even imagine the courage of that man. Just to show up and issue the challenge is incredible, but the way he does it – taunting them, telling them to ‘shout a little louder because perhaps your God is far away – or maybe even sleeping!’ Taunting men who are whipped up into a frenzy, who are covered in their own blood from slashing themselves – who does that?

And then the confidence to soak his own offering in gallons of water and then to call upon God to take this offering with fire in front of all the crowds. If he failed, he wouldn't just look the fool – he would be thrown on the altar himself. For Elijah there is no picking up his marbles and going home if he loses. This game is for keeps.

Well, we all say, 'thank you God that we are not in Elijah's shoes – we don't have to make those kinds of decisions in our lives.' Well guess what – you do in fact have to make that decision. You may not have to do it on a mountaintop in front of hundreds of people who are wishing you dead – but you have exactly the same decision to make.

This is the decision, the most important one you will make in your life. Do you belong to God, or do you belong to the world? In the words of Elijah, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' This is an eternal decision. It affects your future; it affects your present. It's not a decision to put off because you may not get another chance to come back to it.

My father's brother, my uncle Randy, had a series of strokes some years back and between the damage done by the strokes, the onset of dementia and the drugs he has been on since he hasn't really been lucid for a while. His funeral was yesterday. We dare not put off our decisions until tomorrow because we don't know what tomorrow will bring.

It's important that like Elijah we take a firm stand for God. It's not about convincing others about God – that's something different - we take a stand for our own benefit. If we spend our lives plodding along the easy route, we will wake up one day to discover that somewhere along the way we've fallen into worshipping a false God ourselves.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul launches himself at the church, writing I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel. So soon after hearing the life-giving message of the risen Christ, the Galatians have slid back into their old ways – they are allowing themselves to be sucked right back into the way the rest of their culture thinks and acts.

Paul writes of another gospel – a false gospel being spread by some 'who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.' Some are getting the message wrong. They are twisting it and distorting it and causing it to lose its "Jesus-ness". Paul later writes that those who pervert the good news either don't believe the gospel or are uncomfortable with the truth.

He goes on to warn that Satan masquerades as an angel of light, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Paul uses stark and strong language, he doesn't hold back because he is dealing with important matters; life and death issues of faith. Just like Elijah, Paul is a bold truth teller, and he knows it. He asks 'Am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.'

Paul realizes that he can't spread the Christian message and also be loved by everyone. It can't be done. The Christian message is one of love and hope, people love that part of the message – but it also includes facing of the reality of sin in our lives and the fact that we desperately need a savior – there is an uncomfortable truth about ourselves at the heart of the Christian message and most people don't like it. We just want to feel good. But, the Christian message is about truth. Reality must be faced.

While none of us are likely to do something as public as what Elijah did on the mountain, we face the same choice with the same life or death consequences. And it's not just a future choice – I think it's easy for us to simplify the Christian message to 'where will you go after you die' – but it's so much more immediate and present than that. Paul writes of Jesus 'who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age.' This is no watered down possible afterlife message – The message of Christ will set us free in the present.

God's great purpose is not to rescue people out of the world, but to rescue the world itself, including the people, from its present state of corruption and decay. Eternal life begins now, not when we die. Our faith, our decision – for faith is a decision – is an all or nothing deal. There are no halfway measures. We either trust God with our lives and for our lives, or we default into trusting the world.

There is one gospel, one gospel only. There is one son of God, one son only. Paul writes 'Let anyone who tells you differently be accursed, even I, if I come back tomorrow with a different story, don't believe it!'

Like Elijah, we are outnumbered. The world is big, the opposition is terrifying - 450 bloody frenzied worshippers seeking our death – it seems overwhelming and over powering. But we have one Jesus who wants us to live. We need nothing else. Don't put it off. Choose. Every day when you wake up, before you do anything else - choose. Every time your head hits the pillow, as your day closes - choose.

Life does not happen by accident; life is intentional, purposeful, we are here by the will of God, and so let us willfully turn to him in thanksgiving and praise and say 'the Lord indeed is God, the Lord indeed is God.'

Amen.