

“THE SOUND OF A GREAT RAIN.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: I Kings 18:41-46

Judgment before blessing, fire before rain.

If you were to ask King Ahab what was the greatest problem in Israel he would say it was the drought and the famine that followed. Which means Elijah was the troubler of Israel, because he is the prophet behind the lack of rain.

If you were to ask prophet Elijah what was the greatest problem in Israel he would say it was idolatry, breaking covenant with Yahweh.

The confrontation on Mt. Carmel wasn't a climate conference, it wasn't a rain dance, it was a confrontation with idolatry. The great God war with Baal has been decisively won and the prophets of Baal were defeated.

Only after judgment falls on the sin of idolatry, can the issue of drought be addressed. There must be judgment before blessing, fire before rain. The cross before the crown. Repentance before forgiveness.

If you ask politicians today what is the greatest problem in America you might hear Covid or the economy or climate change. There might even be a few who would blame the church, blame Christianity, blame Christians. I know a few prominent atheists who believe Christianity is what's wrong with the world.

If you ask Christians what the greatest problem in America is, you might get a variety of answers. We certainly are not unified on that point. I have said before I believe the problem is sin, idolatry, abandoning of God, silencing of His Word, in a word godless rebellion.

For that reason I believe Covid will not go away until the underlying reason for it is dealt with. There must be the fire of repentance before the healing of the land.

The king eats, the prophet prays.

Our text presents us with a contrast between a king and a prophet, one eats while the other prays.

Elijah tells Ahab to go and eat and drink while he goes up to the top of Mt. Carmel to pray.

Why? Is this meant to show us how hard is Ahab's heart? After three and a half years of drought and famine, after a judgment in fire, rather than give worship and thanks to God, he rushes off to satisfy himself. Has he no fear of God? Didn't he see the fire fall, didn't he see the prophets of Baal utterly humiliated and destroyed?

How common is this in our day and in our land and in our hearts? How dull are we, how insensitive to spiritual realities, how devoid of spiritual thoughts and concerns? Eat, drink, and be merry, without any thought to what tomorrow might hold.

The world is doing this, what about us? Do we quickly turn from holy things to matters of the flesh? Do we rush home from worship to turn the game on and quickly forget our encounter with the holy living God? Do we read Scripture and then forget what the God of the universe has said to us? Do our fleshly appetites and lusts trump our spiritual life?

The king hears Elijah say rain is coming so he is off to eat. His heart is not changed. Another prophet 500 years later who came in the spirit of Elijah would ask the searching question, "where is the fruit of your repentance?"

The prophet in prayer.

It is interesting how often in Scripture God allows us to have glimpses of His people in private moments of intimate prayer. God wants to instruct us in prayer and encourage us in prayer.

Elijah withdraws to the top of Mt. Carmel and assumes the posture of intense, focused prayer. He bows down with his face between his knees. His body is in harmony with his spirit and what he is asking.

He is a wise man. He could be proud, having just won one of the greatest battles ever fought. But he is no longer before Baal's prophets or Israel's king. He is before the living God who gave the victory. Humility is the only posture.

Elijah is a great man, a man's man, but most importantly a praying man. He was a great prophet but he had no power to bring life or bring rain.

He had to pray for life to be restored to the widow's son. He had to pray and ask for fire to fall. He has to pray for rain to come. The truth be told, prayer is a rather humbling work.

Have you noticed how central prayer is to this entire God-war? It is first and foremost a spiritual battle with the cosmic forces, the principalities and powers. Elijah set the stage for the entire confrontation as one of prayer.

I Kings 18:24 You call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.”

As it was with fire, now it is with rain.

I Kings 18:42-43 So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. 43 And he said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” And he went up and looked and said, “There is nothing.” And he said, “Go again,” seven times.

Why does Elijah pray for what God has already promised?

If he is so certain of rain as to tell Ahab to go and eat, why pray? God gave a specific promise at the beginning of the chapter.

I Kings 18:1 After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, “Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.”

God providentially wills to send rain. God's will cannot be thwarted. God's will is certain, so why does he have to pray for what is already promised and part of God's will?

Prayer is one of the great wonders that God has given to the world. It is a spectacular gift that God delights to do His will in answer to the prayers of His people. Prayer is not God's only channel for accomplishing His will, but it certainly is one of His favorite paths.

Ezekiel 36:37-28 “Thus says the Lord God: This also ***I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them:*** to increase their people like a flock. 38 Like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts, so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am the Lord.”

Zechariah 10:1 Ask rain from the Lord in the season of the spring rain, from the Lord who makes the storm clouds, and he will give them showers of rain.

Isaiah 11:9 The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Matthew 6:10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Jacob wrestled with God in Genesis, and God allowed Himself to be overcome. In prayer God allows Himself to be overcome, and He condescends to our requests, for the sake of His glory.

When God wants to send a great blessing, He stirs up prayer.

Think of it this way. A farmer wakes up one morning and decides and declares he is going to fill his barn with hay. And then he goes out and hires four high school students to do it.

There is the ends and the means to the end. God declares what He will do and then He moves His people to pray for it. God takes great delight and pleasure in doing things for His people on earth, but He especially takes pleasure in doing things in answer to prayer.

What incredible honor God gives to us to give our prayers that much importance.

The more confident we are of a blessing, the more we should pray, not the less. Pray God's will, pray God's Word, pray down God's blessing. Prayer is the path to the thing promised.

God had already promised to send rain and was going to do so, yet he waits until Elijah prays and not just once but seven times.

The mystery of the delay to prayer.

On Mt. Carmel Elijah prayed a short prayer and fire fell immediately.

Why this agonizing ordeal of delayed response?

He prays and looks, nothing. He prays and looks, nothing.

In the next chapter God won't answer his prayer at all.

God doesn't deal with each of us the same way, and He doesn't deal with us the same way from one time to the next.

Sometimes prayer is relatively easy, other times painfully difficult.

In it all God is wise and good and He is teaching and training us.

One thing this teaches us is God doesn't answer based on our urgency or fervency or rightness or justness. We have no claim on God, it is all grace. In His time, according to His will.

Psalm 40:1 I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

The sound of a great rain.

It begins as a cloud the size of a man's hand will bring a great rain.

Zechariah 4:10 Whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice.

Don't despise small things, small beginnings. It is God's way to do great things from very small beginnings. Small things ordained by a very big God become great things.

God is God of the spectacular and the ordinary, fire and rain. We should never take either for granted, especially the ordinary, the routine. Start warming up for Thanksgiving by thanking God for the normal, mundane, average things of life, for all His good gifts.

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father.

You know how people talk about the good old days. Well the good old days were terrible. Outhouses, pumping water, no AC, no screens on windows (invented in 1880's). But today who thanks God for indoor plumbing, window screens, refrigerators, wash machines and horseless carriages?

When we don't acknowledge God for the small, little normal, expected things in life, we fall into a form of naturalism, materialism, and become blind to the God behind everything.

The most common things are a special part of God's grace.

Elijah running before King Ahab.

We began with a contrast between Ahab and Elijah, eating and praying. We end with a contrast, one leading another following.

Here is another God miracle enabled by God's power and grace. Elijah out ran horses and a chariot for 18 miles from Mt. Carmel to Jezreel.

What does this mean, or signify? The hand of the Lord is in this, so it must mean something.

While it may not be an explicit meaning in the text, I see an implicit implication/application of a general truth.

The Word of the Lord must go before the king. God's Word leads the way, the king must submit to the Word. The Word precedes the throne, the church precedes the culture.

Israel's hope for renewal rests on the king receiving the Word of Yahweh and obeying it. The king must follow the prophet.

In Herman Melville's classic novel, Moby Dick, he describes the sailor Ishmael in a seacoast church one Sunday.

“[The pulpit's] paneled front was in the likeness of a ship's bluff bows, and the Holy Bible rested on a projecting piece of scroll work, fashioned after a ship's fiddle-headed beak.

What could be more full of meaning?- for the pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.

The pulpit is the world's prow.

“We have a weak message (Christ crucified), proclaimed by weak preachers (full of fear and trembling), received by weak hearers... For God chose a weak instrument to bring a weak message (the cross) to weak people... But through this triple weakness the power of God was- and still is- displayed... power through weakness, dramatized in the Lamb on the throne or God on the cross, lies at the very heart of ultimate reality, even of the very being of God himself.” (John Stott).

The Bible assures us repeatedly of God's sovereignty, especially over governments: the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord (Proverbs 21); Cyrus

the pagan king, who did not know God, was God's messiah to rescue Israel (Isaiah 45). Ahab is a pawn in the hands of God.

The Word of God is not impotent, it will accomplish all God wills. Man is but a breath, here today and gone tomorrow, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.

Preaching the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the world's only hope. There is salvation in no other name under heaven. Jesus is this world's only Savior, there is no other. Certainly as Chuck Colson liked to say, salvation will never arrive on Air Force One. There is no true freedom apart from the truth of Jesus Christ that sets us truly free.

We must put the Bible in front of the news, in front of the commentary and analysis of what is going on in our world. We must put the Bible in front of all our decisions and choices. We must put the Bible in front of what our kids are taught in school. We must put the Bible in front of the social and moral issues of our day. We must put God's Word in front of Supreme Court decisions.

This is the answer to all the problems of our world. This is the only truly effective response to human selfishness, corruption, evil and sin.

God made a promise to Abraham, that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed. And that promise has been kept over and over again all over the world. Because of this book the nations of the world have been and are being blessed.

This book is being proclaimed from pulpits all over the world and it is leading the world to a glorious future, a redemptive future, when every knee will bow and every tongue confess Jesus that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father, and men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation will come and worship Him.

Acts 17:11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

I John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Conclusion.

This is our story. 120 disciples of Jesus in an upper room praying and praying. And then the sound of a great rain, no a rushing wind.

Acts 2:1-4 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

After three years with Jesus, they receive the abundance of Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus. The fullness of God falls on them, clothed with power from on high as Jesus promised.

Luke 24:49 And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

And with that power of God in you, you will be enabled to run and not grow weary.

Isaiah 40:28-31 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.
29 He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.
30 Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;
31 but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Prayer for the sound of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in repentance and faith, in a holy fear of the Lord and in a love for the truth.

Pray for the sound of the rain of revival, renewal, repentance, humbling ourselves before God, turning from sin to salvation.

Pray for the sound of a great rain in your life, in your family, in our church and nation.

Pray for the sound of the abundance of a great rain, the rain of God’s mercy and grace.