

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"A Judging & Saving God, Part 2"

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:1-16

Rev. Steve Filyk

November 2, 2020

Songs/Hymns: #611 -- For all the saints (1,2,4,7,8), #299 -- Holy, holy, holy, The Lord's My Shepherd (Getty),

Praise the Father, Praise the Son

Communion Sunday

All Saints Sunday

When I meet with a family to plan a memorial

We go over the admin

And the details of the service

And then I ask them to tell me about the loved one who has died.

At first, they come up with words, descriptors.

They tell me that he was *loyal* or she was *generous*.

But then they start telling stories.

This is where I really get to meet the person who has died.

The truth is that only using descriptors

Like *loyal* or *generous*, misses all the nuances.

We are all an amalgam of different characteristics

And it is this mixture that make us unique and interesting.

I think it was when I was chatting with Betty Anne McCallum's Family

That Betty Anne's son Rob said his dad was a disciplinarian.

He told us that his dad always told him why.

Dave always let him know why he was being punished.

Rob added that he believed this helped him develop

The good character he has today.

Something would have been missing if Rob had simply said
“Dad was a disciplinarian” and moved on.

That small piece Rob added really filled in the picture.
It helped me picture a loving dad who was concerned
About his boys learning the difference
between right and wrong.

But if you need a big canvas to paint an accurate picture of a loved one,
Then how about God.

If I asked a random group of people to tell me about the God of the Bible
They would likely throw out words, descriptors
Like ‘loving’ or ‘harsh and judgmental’.

On their own these descriptors
Can turn into caricatures.

In the hands of Richard Dawkins *judgemental* is stretched to *sadistic*.

In *The God Delusion* he describes the God of the Old Testament as:
“jealous and proud of it;
a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak;
a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser...”ⁱ

Dawkins continues adding a dozen derogatory adjectives.

But while his description is impressive
It seems clear that he didn't come across the story
About the God who 'remember Hannah',
The God we encountered last week.

But it's not only atheists
who provide us with caricatures.

Just consider John Wesley's portrayal Jesus in a well-known hymn:

"Lamb of God, I look to thee,
Thou shalt my example be;
Thou art gentle, meek and mild;
Thou wast once a little child."ⁱⁱ

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild...

Did Wesley forget Jesus' verbal attacks on the Pharisees,
Or how he ran the money-changers out of the temple,
Or John's vision of him riding on a white warhorse
to execute judgment and wage war.ⁱⁱⁱ

Most of the adjectives we use to describe God are inadequate;
they fail to capture the nuances provided by Scripture.

It's the stories of the Bible
Where we really met the God of Israel.

But before we get into today's story
Let me provide some background.

In our survey of the Old Testament

We have skipped over the high point of Jewish political history:
The United Kingdom under David and Solomon.

Where we enter today's reading

the kingdom has fallen apart
Both politically and religiously.

Today are in the northern kingdom of Israel

Which is ruled by what the Bible remembers
As one of the worst kings on record: King Ahab.

So why is Ahab disparaged?

He marries the daughter of a Canaanite King (Ethbal of the Sidonians)
and welcomes the worship of her foreign gods
even constructing places to worship them.^{iv}

In both of these actions Ahab is disregarding the law given to Israel
By the God who rescued them from Egypt.

That first commandment "no other gods"

Was given because, yes, God is jealous
And won't share God's glory with others.^v

But this commandment, along with all the others

Were designed to keep the people out of slavery,
to anyone/anything who is not worthy of their trust.

In some way the worship of Ahab's wife's god, is attractive.

Baal was worshipped as a fertility god.
He was seen by his worshippers as the personal force
behind the rains, the dew, the thunder and lightening.^{vi}

For all those Hebrew farmers,
Worrying about their crops,
Baal seems to be just the god they needed.

But while the God of Israel
rescued the people from Egypt
and saved their first-born from the destroyer,

Baal “normally required the sacrifice of children,
often the first-born male child, by sacrifice by fire.”^{vii viii}

Listen to what the verses just previous to today’s reading tell us.
This is from *The Message*:

“It was under Ahab’s rule that Hiel of Bethel refortified Jericho,
but at a terrible cost:

He ritually sacrificed his firstborn son Abiram
at the laying of the foundation,
and his youngest son Segub
at the setting up of the gates.

This is exactly what Joshua son of Nun said would happen.”^{ix}

Baal worship now seems less attractive.

The god who was supposed to provide rain and blessings
Asked for the people's children in return.

This appals the God who rescued the people from genocide in Egypt.
And so the God of Israel will remind them
Who is really in charge.

The God of Israel will shut up the heaven.
God will stop the rains.

You can understand that this was a direct challenge
To those who believed Baal was in charge of the weather.

But causing the rains to stop is no small lesson.
A lack of precipitation quickly becomes a drought.
Drought leads to famine
And famine causes death.

So in the end is the God who rescued Israel
Any better than Baal?

Today's Bible lesson goes great distance in answering this question.
This story tells us in how God deals with both the faithful
And the foreigner in a time of judgement.

So what happens?

We are told that God takes action to preserve Elijah through the drought.
Twice it is mentioned that 'God directed'.

God sends Elijah to a brook and has ravens directed to supply him.
When the brook dries up, God sends Elijah to a foreign widow
Who is also 'directed' to care for him
Even though she's not conscious of it.

In this way the faithful (represented by Elijah) are preserved.

But if this lesson is meant to teach rebellious Israel
What about their neighbors
Who will be affected by the same weather?

What about the collateral damage?

It is interesting to note that God sends Elijah to a widowed Sidonian,
A Canaanite woman whose religion
Had become a trap to Israel.

When Elijah meets this woman
She is preparing to eat her final resources
After which she and her son will starve.

But by welcoming Elijah they receive a miraculous blessing:
that remaining oil and flour do not run out.

God preserves the foreigner in a time of famine.

But if she is preserved for a moment,
Another disaster quickly strikes:
The woman's son falls ill and stops breathing.

The woman blames Elijah, and Elijah blames God.

But when Elijah calls out to God,
The boy's life returns to him.

God preserve the foreigner in a time of famine
God also preserves the foreigner in a time of illness.

And it is through this preservation
That the Canaanite woman comes to know the God of Israel.

At the end of the story she proclaims:
"Now I know...
that the word of the Lord from your mouth
Is true."x

The widow comes to know that God's word is true.

So in the end what do we learn about God from the story?
Is God a disciplinarian? YES
Is God jealous? YES

Does God want to teach his people? YES
Does God want to keep them out of slavery? YES

Does God preserve the faithful? YES
Does God care about the foreigner? YES

YES. YES. YES.

Our God is not one-dimensional.

Our God judges.

And our God saves.

In a few moments we will be sharing the Lord's Supper.

We will relive that story of God's judgment on everything

That distracts and enslaves us.

We will relive that story of God's rescue:

How God gave everything so that we can live in true freedom

And enjoy a life that is full and lasting.

Amen.

ⁱ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

ⁱⁱ Charles Wesley "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild"

ⁱⁱⁱ Revelation 19:20 NIV

^{iv} See Tremper Longman III "Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C" 230

^v Exodus 20:1

^{vi} See Tremper Longman III "Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C" 230

^{vii} See "Baal, Ashtoreth and Molech – God's Old Testament rivals" *Redlands Facts Daily* January 11, 2007

<https://www.redlandsdailyfacts.com/2007/01/11/baal-ashtoreth-and-molech-gods-old-testament-rivals/>

^{viii} See also Jeremiah 19:4-5

^{ix} 1 Kings 16:34 MSG

^x 1 Kings 17:24 NIV