

Walking into Conflict

1 Kings 18:1, 18:17-19

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

Over the next four Sundays I will be preaching on the theme, "Walking through Conflict." Our text for this series will come from the great story of the prophet Elijah who was called into conflict with King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and the prophets of Baal.

Conflict is everywhere. It's in the Middle East, Afghanistan, the Kashmir, Sudan, Indonesia, the Balkans -- the list goes on and on. Conflict is in families, schools, workplaces, government, churches, and denominations. It's even in our own hearts that are torn apart by the inner conflicts between guilt and grace.

According to the Bible, the conflicts began as soon as Adam and Eve left paradise. In the very next chapter of the story one brother rises up against another. After Cain slew Able, the trail of blood continued to run through history from one conflict to the next: from slavery to a conquest of the land, from invasions by other nations to the destruction of Jerusalem and exile, from the arrival of a Savior to Herod's slaughter of the innocents, from the confrontational teachings of that Savior to his execution, and from the resurrection that was in conflict with death to the birth of the church that was in conflict with its persecutors.

The biblical story begins with the killing of a brother and it ends with Armageddon. So don't think the Bible contains just a few polite teachings on peace. In the words of Jesus, "Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." What Jesus meant is that from the moment Adam and Eve reached for something more than they were created to have, God himself has been in conflict with our world that has lost its way. And the arrival of the Son of God is nothing less than the entrance of the sacred into our conflicts.

So the point of worshiping God is not to find sanctuary or to avoid conflict. It isn't even to triumph in conflict. The point is to enter conflict, always looking for the God who can be found in the midst of it. Thus, to avoid conflict is to avoid seeing God.

King Ahab was one of the all-time great conflict avoiders of history. As a result, the injustice in Israel became worse and worse until God decided it was time to get involved. Then the king discovered that the conflict was now with his God.

It was a lousy time to be the king of Israel. The nation had been split in two by civil war. The economy was in shambles. And the Assyrians were threatening to invade from the North. Ahab was doing the best he could with these frightening affairs of state. He built a new capital city in Samaria, and he developed political alliances with other small nations. But his greatest hope rested in the marriage that had been shrewdly arranged by his father. This was a marriage to the daughter of the king of the Phoenicians. To a woman named Jezebel.

This was the best of times for the Phoenicians. Politically, militarily, and economically, they were far superior to Israel. So Princess Jezebel brought quite a dowry to this marriage. She brought new trade agreements, new ports on the Mediterranean Sea, political security, and she brought her fanatical devotion to the Phoenician god Baal. Baal was an idol of fertility who promised to make the rain fall and the earth fruitful. The Phoenicians had been worshiping Baal for a long time, and they were doing a lot better than Israel was.

So when Jezebel moved into the palace and instituted the worship of Baal, Ahab didn't think it was a big deal. Baal was such a harmless god, just an idol who made lots of promises and no demands. And we've always loved undemanding gods. When Jezebel recruited 450 prophets of Baal to do a little evangelism in Israel, Ahab thought he was just being religiously tolerant. When she tore down the altars to the Lord Yahweh, Ahab thought she was just being a fundamentalist. But by the time she began killing the Lord's prophets, Ahab realized it was too late to stop her. There is no such thing as an undemanding idol. All of them gradually take everything.

Ahab didn't want to get entangled in these religious issues. He was just trying to pull his country out of an economic and military mess. When it came to religion, the king didn't mean to turn his back on the Lord, he was just being a pluralist. But he was married to a fundamentalist. Anytime a country is run by a pluralist and a fundamentalist, the fundamentalist will always prevail.

When God saw his prophets being slaughtered in the streets of Israel, and when he saw Ahab doing nothing but avoiding this travesty, God decided to get involved in the conflict. He called on a man named Elijah to stand before the king and announce there would be a great drought in the land. This has a wonderful sense of irony to it since Baal was supposed to ensure that the rain would keep falling.

So ultimately this conflict is between God and Baal. But everyone gets drawn into it. There is no neutral in the great cosmic conflict between God and the idols that try to pull us from his hands. It's either God or materialism, God or terrorism, God or greed, racism, violence, injustice. As Elijah keeps trying to explain, you have to take a side. In fact, that's one of the ways you define your life -- by choosing whether you will use your life for God or against him. No one avoids that choice.

After three years of drought, Elijah again stood before the king. When Ahab saw him, he said, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" Isn't that typical for a conflict avoider? Ahab's beef with Elijah is that he is causing trouble by speaking up. Elijah responds by saying, "It isn't I who have troubled Israel, but you. For you have forsaken the commandments of God and followed the Baals." Then Elijah called for a showdown between Baal and Yahweh on Mt. Carmel.

Next week we are going to look at this great contest on the mountain. It's one of the most dramatic passages of the Bible. But today, I want to take to you to another place. This is a lonely place, where God prepared Elijah for the conflict on the mountain, at a stream called Cherith.

We are told that it was east of the Jordan River. I don't know if you have ever been east of the Jordan, but there isn't much out there--just a lot of desert, and apparently one small thread of water. That's where God sent Elijah after he first went to Ahab and announced the drought and before Elijah returned to Ahab, and essentially called Baal out for a fight. At the stream, there was just enough water to keep Elijah alive, and for food God sent him ravens who brought bread and meat. So for three years it was Elijah alone with God, who was faithfully caring for his servant with a tender stream in the desert.

We have seen this stream in the desert at other places in the Bible. When the Hebrews were running away from Egypt and thought they would die of thirst in the desert, God made a stream of water flow out of a rock. When Isaiah was proclaiming good news to the exiles, he said, "Waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert." The Psalmist said, "The righteous are like trees planted by streams of water." When Jesus was speaking to the woman at the well he said, "Those who drink of the water I give will never thirst again. The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The stream is a repeated biblical image of how God cares for those who are on a hard journey.

So before you go to the mountain to enter into conflict, you first have to spend time alone with God at the stream. When you enter into a conflict, you had better have your spiritual act together. And it is at the stream that you iron out the conflicts within your own soul. That's your greatest enemy in the conflict. Your real enemy is not whoever opposes you. Your real enemy is self-doubt. You have good reason to doubt yourself. Maybe it is because your hands are not clean since you have also flirted with Baal. Maybe it is because you are wondering who you are to take on the king. Or because you are not certain you are right or where God is to be found in this conflict. Or maybe it is because you are overwhelmed with advice and just don't know what to do.

You resolve those internal issues not in the heat of conflict, but alone with God, perhaps early in the morning where you spend time each morning in prayer and Bible reading. There you find your stream in the desert. There you learn again who you are, who God is, and what it is that you have to do.

O God, give us the courage to walk through this life as disciples of Jesus, even to the end that his conflicts shall now become our conflicts as well. Amen.