

Walking with a Limp

1 Kings 18:20-24

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

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

Sometimes in our walk with God we find that we are spiritually limping. Our prayer life dries up. Our fear exceeds our faith; our guilt exceeds our joy. These limps occur when we don't put all our weight on God's grace.

Today's Scripture calls us to take our place with the people of Israel on Mt. Carmel. There we stand in the presence of two imposing altars. The first altar is not in good shape, because it has not been used often. It is the altar where we worship before the Lord God. Standing beside it is the lone prophet Elijah. The second altar is in very good shape, because it's popular and used often. Around it stand the 450 prophets of the idol Baal.

As we stare at these two altars, we realize that a contest is about to begin. It is a contest between the Lord God and Baal that we have forced, because these gods are competing for our hearts.

In each of our lives these two altars exist. At the one we worship the transcendent God, who cannot be controlled, and who mysteriously leads us through the often-fearful drama of life. At the other altar we worship Baal, who is far more manageable because he is not transcendent. Baal is a god we have shaped with our own hands. Thus, he is a god we control, which means he is not a god at all.

Baal has more contemporary names and comes in a variety of forms today. You know your favorite idol, just as I know mine. Baal is whatever you turn to just in case. He is the way we hedge our bets on the true Lord God and what we rely upon when God doesn't pull through the way we expect.

We are very, very devoted to Baal. That is why his altar in our heart is in better condition than the one where we pray to the Lord God. Baal worship was introduced to Israel by their foreign Phoenician queen Jezebel. He was supposed to keep the rain coming down and the crops coming up. Even though there had been a drought in the land for the last three years, the people kept worshipping Baal. Our idols not being effective doesn't keep us from worshipping them.

Suddenly the air is pierced by the voice of Elijah, who screams at us, "How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow him, but if Baal then follow him." A choice. You have to make a choice about who or what is your god. That is how spiritual renewal always begins in a person's life -- by confessing you have been limping between two opinions about God.

At the Sunday morning altar we claim to believe God is our Creator, but all week long we worship before the altars that tell us we can create our own lives. So we bow before the Baals called hard work, achievement, and money. With these idols we think we can recreate life to fit our dreams.

At the Sunday morning altar we claim to believe that God is our Deliverer, but all week long we worship before the altars that tell us we are on our own. Some of you have suffered for years through the long drought of broken bodies and broken hearts, loneliness, bad relationships, devastating hurts between parent and child, and guilt. Oh, so much guilt. We don't doubt that God could deliver us from these things. What we doubt is that he will. It isn't God's power we have a hard time believing, but his compassion. As a person said to me recently, "I don't have any trouble praying for others, but I really doubt that God will deliver me."

At the Sunday morning altar we claim to believe Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, but all week long we

worship before the altars that tell us, "You are the savior." So we knock ourselves out in front of Baal's altar trying to make other people happy with us, trying to fix other people's lives for them, and trying to make ourselves necessary to someone or something. But you are not anybody's savior! Only Baal would tell you such an obvious lie.

So we have these two opinions about God: the one we claim to believe and the one we demonstrate by how we live. These two opinions make us limp as we go back and forth in our devotion to the gods. But the Lord your God is a jealous God, and he loves you too much to let you continue limping through life. His dream is for you to run without being weary and to walk without fainting. So a time comes, when out of his mercy, he will reveal the powerlessness of your favorite Baal.

On Mt. Carmel, in front of all of us, Elijah set the rules for this great contest. First, the prophets of Baal will prepare a sacrifice on their altar, then he will prepare a sacrifice on the altar of the Lord God. They will call upon the name of their god, and he will call upon the name of the Lord God. And the god who answers by fire ... he is God.

From morning to noon, the prophets of Baal danced in front of their altar, crying out, "O Baal, answer us!" With a hint of irony the text says, "they began to limp about the altar they had made." By noon, Elijah is feeling pretty good about the way this thing is going. He starts to tease the prophets of Baal. "Cry louder. Maybe he has wandered away. Maybe he is on a journey. Oh, I know, maybe he fell asleep. You'd better wake him up." So they cry louder, and cut themselves, and bleed for their god. And the text says, "But there was no voice, no answer, no response." That is the problem with Baal. It doesn't matter how frantically you worship, when you need salvation, there will be no response from any god you have made for yourself.

By 3:00 in the afternoon, Elijah figures that enough is enough. It's his turn. He begins by repairing the altar of the Lord God that has been neglected. The building drama of the text suddenly slows down as it contrasts the crazed activity of the prophets of Baal with Elijah's very deliberate activity of repairing the Lord's altar, one stone at a time. True spirituality can't be rushed. It has nothing to do with how hard you try at life and everything to do with your faithfulness in daily prayer and reading of the Bible. One stone at a time, you build a spiritual life.

After repairing the Lord's altar, Elijah places wood on it, and lays a bull on the wood. Then he douses the sacrifice with 12 great jars of water, which in a drought was a greater sacrifice than the bull. After this he prays, "O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, answer me. Answer me that this people may know that you are God and that you have turned their hearts back."

Then he steps back and throws his arms up to heaven. Suddenly a bolt of fire shot down from the sky and the altar exploded into flames! The fire consumed the bull, the wood, the stones, and licked up all the water. "When all of the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord indeed is God. The Lord indeed is God.'" Revival had just broken out on Mt. Carmel.

Now it may surprise you to hear me say this, but revival is not God's favorite phenomena, and lying with your face on the ground is not God's favorite posture for you. If you insist on flirting with the Baals, God will eventually lead you to some Mt. Carmel experience where you see how limited they are. If you're expecting a job, relationship, health, or stock market to save you, it is only a matter of time before you are massively disappointed. On that day, you'll fall on your face before God. But that's not what God really wants.

What he really wants is for you not to need the spiritual renewal. What he really wants is for you to keep walking with him, day after day, using both feet, placing all your weight, on his love for you. He wants you to keep his altar of daily prayer well used.

If you haven't ever seen fire falling down from the sky or a single bona fide miracle in your whole life, then you are blessed. Because the absence of the miracle has made room for faith in your life. And faith is a choice to continue loving God even in the times of drought. That's what God really wants.

He doesn't want to overwhelm you. He wants you to choose to love him. When it comes to reasons for hope, he wants you to have only one opinion.

Keep us moving, O God, in good times and through the long droughts, keep us moving with all our devotion focused on you who are so devoted to us. Amen.