



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church

Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

May 29 – “Well Spoken- 1 Kings 18:19-39”

Rev. Jennie Sankey

How do you know God is real? Has anyone ever asked you this question? I think if you are a regular human being, when you let this question sink in, it starts to get uncomfortable. How do I know? Hm. Well what I can tell you is that I know the stories of the Bible really well. I also know Reformed theology and what it means to be Presbyterian. I can tell you what I believe. But how do I know God is real?

This is the question our story today of the great contest between Yahweh and Baal is getting at. Yes, there's a sermon all about idolatry in here, and about testing God, and about having faith. But the whole reason this scenario even happens is because the Israelite's, God's chosen people, can't answer the question, “How do you know God is real?”

In this story, we've got two sides. Sort of. One side is made up of Baal Worshipers. They are led by a king, supported by 850 religious leaders, and followed by everyone in the country. It's not that they have anything against Yahweh, the God of their ancestors, but they'd like to try out Baal, because Baal, a Canaanite god is in charge of agriculture and fertility, and at the moment, Israel really could use some rain, because they've had a drought for 3 long years. So it can't hurt to try both, right?

The other side is made up of Yahweh worshippers. Make that one worshipper singular. Elijah, a wandering prophet. Elijah has been roaming around in the desert during this drought, where God has ravens bringing him bread and meat every day. Elijah has been experiencing a real God who provides him food and works miracles in the midst of dryness. He knows God is real, because he is fed and given water every day.

When we try to answer the question “how do I know God is real?” I think the first place we might go to is “well, when has God given me what I want?” Maybe it's when our prayers for healing are answered, when we finally find the perfect job, when we are happy and content. And yes, God is present and real in all of those moments. But if we only remember God is real when we are happy, then we won't be able to answer this question in a 3 year drought. Or when a loved one passes too soon. Or when we hear “you're very qualified, but we don't think you're the best fit” for the 5th time.

So it's in this drought, when God's people can no longer remember why God is real that Elijah shows up to confront King Ahab and proposes a contest.

Elijah sets the rules. Ahab gathers the whole country as witnesses, and all the prophets of Baal. Elijah turns to the people of Israel. "How long will you go limping with 2 different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him." This is the big question-how do you know God is real? Will you choose to follow a dead idol, or a living, moving God?

Not one word of response is uttered. They just don't know the answer.

Elijah lays out his proposal, and it sounds more than fair. The people answered, "well spoken!!"

Well spoken. Really?

This is that moment when someone asks you a question that you don't know the answer to, and in the awkward silence that you are trying to compose some clever response, someone else jumps in with an answer. And really anything they say sounds better than your silence.

Last week, Dave explained the Trinity to us. Something about fountains, eggs and trees if I remember correctly. Along the way, after we got finally got over the idea that "God is like bacon," we heard Dave say "we become like the God we adore." If we really know the Triune God, Dave said we understand God to be pure love, relationship all the way through. This means that at our best, we know God in each other. At our worst, we are isolated, seeking God in things that aren't alive like money, screens, and achievement. We might find ourselves alongside the Israelites on Mt. Carmel calling upon an unresponsive Baal, (no voice, no answer, no fire..) as dead, and as dry as the drought that has stricken their land. Baal isn't a god. Baal isn't anything. And it is becoming the same for the Israelites. When confronted with their limping wishy-washy faith, they have nothing to say. Like Baal, they have no voice, no answer, no response. They are flat characters. They can't express their opinions, their identity, or their faith. They are becoming dead and dry inside, as dead and dry as Baal. Because they don't know the answer to the question "how do you know God is real?," they have no real faith that rain will come-only frantic desperation that it won't.

Comment [AB1]: You transition too quickly to talking about baal. Maybe say more what we are at our worst

Comment [AB2]: Include some examples of what we do when we turn to blind desperation?

The prophets of Baal try their hardest to answer this question. It seems fair. If their god is real, than then fire reigning from the heavens and accepting their sacrifice seems like a good signal of realness. But it appears that honestly, they aren't sure. To get Baal's attention, they feel they have to scream and shout, dance around, cut themselves, rave and rant "answer us!" all day-but nothing happens. And it's

exhausting. It's exhausting to live a life crying and hoping and asking for what we want and never getting it. It's exhausting to place our faith, time, money and energy into something that doesn't give anything back in return. It's exhausting to have no answer

When they've exhausted their options, Elijah steps up, calm and collected, not a tremor of worry in his voice as he asks the people to "come closer." We already heard how this story ends. Fire rains down from heaven and consumes Elijah's offering, and the people know God is real, right? That's the answer to the question-We know God is real, because the fire came down. A few more verses after this story, rain comes again to the land, and we know God is real. But Elijah wants to better equip his people to answer this question. He doesn't want to leave them only with intense moments of power, with mountaintop moments. So he invites them closer as he begins to build the altar.

He takes 12 stones to build it up-And it's not just numbers-It's a memory of one of Israel's greatest moments. After Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt, and they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, God brought them to the Promised Land. Led by their new leader Joshua, Yahweh instructed them to stop before they ran into this new life of freedom and just for a moment, be in awe of the power of God, remembering where they came from and how they were to go forward. God told them that before they carry across the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence among them, they should take 12 stones, one for each tribe of Israel. These stones were to meant memorialize the history of God's faithfulness to God's people. Joshua writes, "When your children ask in time to come, "what do these stones mean to you?" then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord." This is how they will remember God is real.

We may not have a pile of stones around our house to remind us, but as descendents of this faith, as people of Yahweh, we share these same stories of a fantastic, miracle working God. This book, containing human record of God's word, is in a way our memorial to faith-so that when our children ask "what does this mean to you?" we can answer with the stories of scripture. But we also have some testaments to God's realness beyond this book. We are here today, because we have experienced God in our life. We've got the stories of our relationships with partners and friends when we knew God was real, because of the love between two people. We have stories of loved one passing to soon, but when we knew God was real in our sadness and anger, as people surrounded us with support and solidarity. We have stories of getting that 5th job rejection, when we knew God was real, even in another meal of rice and beans, because we still had dinner. And we've got to tell these stories so that they point to the

Comment [AB3]: Use more dramatic transition. This is how we know God is real. Go back to your specific examples (loved one dies, trouble applying for job) and have an answer. "When you have had your fifth rejection email for a job, you can remember how God provides for God's people. How god has provided for you" you talked about earlier.

faithfulness and realness of God. We MUST tell these stories-so that we nurture one another in the Christian faith to know that “the Lord is God indeed.”

As Elijah slowly dug a trench, arranged the wood, prepared the bull, and poured gallons and gallons of water on top of it all, these stories must have been flooding back to those watching. “We know God is real, because we are created in God’s image. We know God is real, because of our long family history-back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who gave us 12 sons and 12 tribes. We know God is real, because when we were slaves, oppressed and tired, God was with us, hearing our cries. We know God is real, because we crossed the red sea. We know God is real, because we have this land, our families, our homes. We know God is real because we have life and breath.

The Elijah pauses for a quiet prayer, drawing even closer, so the people could hear. “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. 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.”

In this moment, Elijah has no doubt that God is real, that Yahweh is on their side, or that God has forgotten them. He is praying that the rest of God’s people will remember this too, and let it change their lives.

When the fire reigns down, and consumes everything Elijah built, even the water, the people fell on their faces and finally answer. “The Lord is God indeed.” God is real, and we know it for sure. We knew it in the stones, and we see it in the fire.

We’ve got to let the question “How do you know God is real?” shape our whole lives. We have to take deliberate time to see whatever our 12 stones are, and point when we have experienced God. When we remember God’s faithfulness, God’s power, God’s all consuming fire-we’ve got to translate this into our lives and be like the God we adore. When we are the God we adore, relationship all the way through, we are faithful to one another in love and kindness, powerful in our work to love our neighbor, providing nourishment in body and spirit to the stranger, and all-consuming, as we let our faith in our real God be part of every corner of our lives. We may not have a perfect answer every day. It’s even ok to have days when we just don’t know. But if we are going to teach our children-those of your own, and those in this church; If we are going to survive in the desert, we’ve got to start trying to answer.

So how do you know God is real? What are your go-to stories, when you knew God's presence? At the end of each pew, you'll find a stack of index cards-go ahead and pass those down the row, and if you have an answer to the question, write it down and drop it in the offering plate, anonymously or with your name. We'll find a way to share these with this community, so that when our children ask "what do those stones mean to you? How do you know God is real?" we can step up with a well spoken answer. The Lord is God indeed. Amen.