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Title: Beach Reads Elijah: Fireworks at Carmel

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Scripture: [1 Kings 18:1-46](#), [Exodus 20:3](#), [James 5:17](#), [Hebrews 12:1](#)

Text: [1 Kings 18:2-24, 36-39](#)

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Go. That's the word that begins the next chapter. It is a special word between God and Elijah, the hero of our summer read. Last week, as is our tradition, we picked up a great Bible beach read and the first "Go" was implied. Elijah, whose name means, "My God is Jehovah" shows up in Samaria and puts the baddest of the

bad kings of Judah, King Ahab, on notice. "You and your evil ways of worshiping and promoting Baal have consequences. No rain. Not a drop, not even a whisper of dew, except by my word." And with that, Elijah drops the mic and walks out.

Before the mic hits the floor, Elijah hears the word "go" again. God says, "Go to the Cherith ravine and I'll feed you bird food. You will find that wadi has plenty of water. He goes because Elijah intuitively knows God must do something in him before God can do something through him. After a year of food delivered by ravens and lots and lots of prayer, God again says to Elijah, "Go". There are new lessons of trust that need to be implanted in him.

God says, "Go to Sidon to the widow of Zarephath and help her discover abundance." Elijah goes and as promised, both she and he find that a little jar of meal and a little jug of oil can feed them for more than a year. They also discover that Elijah can call on the power of God to work miracles. In an upper room, Elijah resuscitates the widow's lifeless son, bringing him back from the dead. In doing so, he discovers that his interior work is complete. Even though "Elijah is a person just like us" (James 5:17), the widow rightly states, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth" (1 Kings 17:24) God has completed his work in Elijah and now, God is now ready to work through Elijah.

This brings us to chapter two of this Bible beach read. It starts, "After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year of the drought, saying, "Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain on the earth." (1

Kings 18:1) Note that Elijah doesn't say, "What?" or "You've got to be kidding" or "That's suicide." Elijah is well prepared and now confident in his ability to call upon the power of the Lord. He does go and he runs right into Obadiah. Not the Obadiah who is Jeremiah's contemporary and has a short book in the Bible. This is a different Obadiah, the majordomo of King Ahab's palace.

This Obadiah is working under the nose of the wicked wife of the king, the nasty Jezebel. He was a loyal resistance fighter who "...revered the Lord greatly." (1 Kings 18:3b) He hid every at-risk prophet of Yahweh because Jezebel had turned the economic crisis of the drought into a religious crusade.¹ Anyone who dared speak up for the God of Israel, Jezebel immediately put to death. So, Obadiah rounded up the remaining prophets of Israel. He squirreled away one hundred of them in two secret caves, sneaking them bread and water which, given the drought, was no easy task. It fooled Jezebel. Convinced that she'd killed off all of Yahweh's prophets and Elijah was the only one left, she sent her henchman hunting all over the country for Elijah. When Elijah comes strolling along and bumps into Obadiah, he was terrified. Obadiah falls to the ground and says,

"Is that you Elijah?"

"It is I, the very "My God is Jehovah."

"Shhhh! Quiet. Someone will hear you. Jezebel is hunting all over for you."

"I could care less about her. I'm here to find Ahab. Tell him I'm back in town and want to meet up."

"Are you crazy? What have I done to you? As soon as I go off to find Ahab, you'll hide again. You'll get me killed."

"Nope. Set it up. God wants us to meet and I promise to get it done today. Believe me. Trust me."

He does just that and Ahab, who doesn't seem nearly as determined to destroy Elijah as Jezebel is, goes to meet him. The first thing out of his mouth is an insult, for "When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?'" (1 Kings 18:11) "Nope, I told you my name was Elijah. The trouble is all on you. You and your father's house have gone out of your way to break the laws, ignore Yahweh, and worship Baal. I told you there is no Baal; or, for that matter, no Asherah. Remember what Moses told us. 'You shall have no other gods before me.' (Exodus 20:3) None, nada. There is only one God."

“But we can settle this argument with a contest, not “mano a mano” but mano a mucho, my God against your gods. Me against all of the prophet’s you can muster who serve Baal. And while you are at it, bring on the prophets of the Asherah too. We might as well make the contest interesting. I’m taking on all comers. I’ll show you that my God is it! I think it should be on Mt. Carmel because Jezebel and her buddies kicked down the altar to Yahweh. She thinks she sent Him packing but I’m here to show you, ‘My God is Jehovah’ and He is about to kick altar.”

And that’s how the contest begins. It’s a contest on three levels. It is a contest between prophets, a contest between gods, and a contest for the hearts of Israelites. This is the challenge for every generation. Who will you listen to, what gods do you bow down to, and who has your heart? It is a challenge for us even as it is a challenge for them.

Elijah points this out when he got on top of the mountain and there is a standing room only crowd of Israelites. Elijah says to them “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” The people did not answer him a word.” (1 Kings 18:21) Why? Because they are indeed hopping back and forth between Yahweh and Baal, Yahweh and Asherah. They have divided loyalties.

Then Elijah, confident and full of his newfound spiritual strength says “Look, it’s down to me and them. They’ve got a team of 850. I’m just one. Let them build their altar and I’ll rebuild the altar to the Lord. They can throw their bull on their altar and I will put one on mine. They can call on their gods to fire their altar up and I’ll call upon the one true God. The first who answers with fire is the real deal. Okay?” And the crowd shouted. “Here, here. Let’s do it!” And the contest was on.

It started early in the morning on Mt. Carmel and even though they were the home team, Elijah let the prophets of Baal go first. “They danced around their altar until their feet were sore They made themselves hoarse shouting, pleading, crying to Baal all morning long.”²

At noon, right then and there, Elijah invented trash talking. He simply couldn’t resist getting in a few digs. What’s up with Baal? Is he off mediating or out in the bushes getting comfortable? Or maybe he’s gone to Cyprus for the weekend or he’s just taking a nap after lunch. “Elijah’s goading whipped the prophets of Baal into a greater and greater frenzy. They even jabbed themselves with knives thinking that the sight of blood would do the trick. But by mid-afternoon, the sacrificial offering had begun to smell a little ripe,

and there was still no sign of fire from above."³ Then it was Elijah's turn to show what Yahweh could do.

Like a Las Vegas magician doing card trick and asking people to check hands and sleeves, "Elijah said to all the people, 'Come closer to me'; and all the people came closer to him. First, he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down" (1 Kings 18: 30) using twelve stones left in a heap on Mt. Carmel. This contest was about which God was real and Yahweh is the only One, the God of Jacob who had twelve sons, the twelve tribes of Israel. And the people watching thought, "those stones remind me of Moses and Joshua. I know this. It's an oldie. Twelve stone altars, right!" Once the altar was rebuilt, and the wood and the sacrificial bull were placed on it. Then, Elijah dug a trench around the altar, used to gather the blood of the sacrifice.⁴ All of this was tradition; but at this point, Elijah began to improvise.

"May I have four volunteers from the audience. We haven't met before, have we? " "No." "Will you take these buckets, fill them with water, and pour it over the altar?" They do just that. "Let's do it again; get it good and wet now." They douse it a second time and then, just for good measure, Elijah says, "Once more, a third time. I' like the number three."

Then, like the Sultan of Swat calling his shot in a World Series game against the Cubs, Elijah calls his shot. "Yahweh, you alone are God, the one true God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. I do this at your bidding. Send your fireworks to Carmel. Go ahead and "Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that these people may know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have turned their hearts back." (1 Kings 18:37)

Answer God does with Elijah jumping back just in time. Fire flashed from heaven, as brilliant as the fire that burned before Moses in a bush, that led Israel through the wilderness for forty years, a hot pure fire that lit up the place. "The trench sizzled like fat on a hot griddle. Nothing was left of the offering but a pile of ashes and a smell like the Fourth of July. The onlookers were beside themselves with enthusiasm and, at a signal from Elijah, demolished the losing team down to the last prophet. Nobody could say whose victory had been greater, Yahweh's or Elijah's."⁵

What was clear from the fireworks on Carmel was the number one. One prophet was left standing. One God was God and God alone. And the people of Israel, for at least a moment, stood as one people before God. They answered the question of the day, their question, our question, "Who will you serve? Who has your heart, your undivided loyalty? Who is your God?"

As the story comes to a close, Elijah is back praying. On top of Mt Carmel, he is alone except for his servant. Elijah bows to the ground and begins to pray, not "Please Lord, don't let it rain." (James 5:17) That was his prayer in the Cherinth ravine. This time, it is "Please Lord, bring rain." As he prays, he tells his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea. See if rain clouds are gathering." He went up and looked, and said, "There is nothing."

Elijah keeps bowing his head to the ground, praying for rain. Because God has done something in him, he is confident in his prayers, as sure as he was calling down fire, Elijah knows that God will bring rain.

"Go look again," he says to his servant. "Go seven times. It's a good number, the number of creation. Go. You'll see." And he did, and on the seventh time, there was a cloud, just a little thing, no bigger than a hand visible out over the horizon.

"Elijah, you are right! It's not much but it's there."

Elijah says to his servant, "Quick." "Go say to Ahab, 'Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'" (1 Kings 18:44) Tell him it's going to get muddy fast. If he waits, he'll get stuck and never get back to Jezreel where his chariot army is housed. Then, just as Elijah promised and prayed, "... the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain. Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel." (1 Kings 18:45)

Elijah girded his loins and ran before him. He's fast. "With the great cloud of witnesses who had seen him call down fireworks to Carmel, he laid aside the weight and sin of pride that clings to him and runs with perseverance the race before him." (Hebrews 12:1 paraphrased) It was a marathon actually, the distance from Carmel to Jezreel. If you listen carefully, you might just imagine the theme song from the movie Chariots of Fire. But that's getting ahead of the story.

There are several chapters left including next week's one on one conversation with the One who'd worked in him so that He could work through him. Elijah will hear the word "go" again; but this time, it comes as a whisper.

¹ Cohn, R. L. (1982). The literary logic of 1 Kings 17-19. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101(3), 333-350.

² Buechner, Frederick. This second is a reworking of his famous narrative, in *Peculiar Treasure and Beyond Words*. Also found @ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/21/elijah>

³ Buechner.

⁴ Baukal, Charles. Engineering Analysis of the Fire Miracle at Mt. Carmel. Christian Engineering Conference, 2017.
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e87a/4d6c85f195d31c11e2904d90207c3be8143c.pdf>

⁵ Buechner.