

Trinity 17 (EP-3) (2018) (1 Kings 18)

Some stories in the Bible are sheer drama. The one found in this morning's Old Testament lesson is such a one.

It is the account of the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Here is intrigue, movement, suspense, to say nothing of humour.

I say humour because of Elijah's taunts directed at the prophets of Baal.

"Shout a little louder, Elijah cries out. "Maybe Baal is meditating, or taking a journey, or, according to one translation, **'relieving himself'**." How can that not be funny?

But there is more here than a good yarn. Found in this account is a call and summons that transcends time and cultures.

That call and summons can be summed up in one word: **Choose**.

"Choose ye this day whom ye will serve?"

The poet John Oxenham wrote:

To every man there openeth a way, and ways, and a way,
And the high soul climbs the high way,
And the low soul gropes the low.
And in between, on the misty flats, the rest drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth a high way and a low;
And every man decideth the way his soul shall go.

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I am sure there is no one in this church this morning that does not know the name Billy Graham. Many of you watched his funeral on television back in February.

You know his passion for the Gospel and the difference he made for Christ, not just in this country, but around the world.

But, you may not have heard of a man by the name of Charles Templeton.

Templeton was a contemporary and friend of Billy Graham. Shortly after the end of the Second World War, these two young men toured Europe working for Youth for Christ.

But, in the late '40s, Templeton went to Princeton Theological College, and not long after, began having intellectual doubts.

He began challenging Graham to leave behind his simple Christian faith for something more intellectually sophisticated.

Graham was profoundly affected by his friend's challenges.

In his autobiography, he said that at this period in his life he had more questions than he did answers.

Two ways opened before him: the way of fidelity to the God who had called him to preach the Gospel or the way of making peace with the world. He had to choose.

In 1949, there was major turning point in his life. He accepted an invitation to preach at a Christian retreat centre in California called Forest Home.

He arrived a few days early. During this time, he continued to wrestle with this dilemma.

Could the Bible be trusted? Could the Christ of the Bible be relied upon? How could he know?

As read his Bible, one phrase kept popping out at him: **“Thus sayeth the Lord.”**

That was Scriptures' self-understanding of itself, but was that his?

Then, one evening he took a walk, taking with him his Bible.

Somewhere along the way, he placed it on a tree stump and cried out:

“O God! There are many things in this book I do not understand. There are many problems with it for which I have no solution . . . I can't

answer some of the philosophical and psychological questions [Templeton] and others are raising.”

And then he said he fell to his knees and found himself saying:

“Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by faith . . .”

In his autobiography, he said that as he stood up his eyes stung with tears, but he felt the power and presence of God in a way he hadn't in months. “A major bridge had been crossed,” he wrote.

From that time on, his preaching took on new power. Indeed, at an evangelical meeting the following day 400 people came to Christian faith.

But what about Charles Templeton? What became of him? It's really quite sad.

By 1957, he announced to the world he had lost his Christian faith. And, in 1996, he published his memoirs entitled: “Farewell to God”.

Not too many years before Templeton's death, Lee Strobel interviewed him.

In case you don't recognize the name, Strobel is the Chicago journalist who became a Christian as a result of trying to prove Christianity wrong.

In his bestseller, *The Case for Christ*, Strobel includes a transcript of his interview with Templeton.

In this interview, he began by asking Templeton to assess Jesus, and here is what Templeton said on that occasion:

“He is the greatest human being who ever lived . . .”

“Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus.”

He went on for a time in this fashion, and then, with tears in eyes, ended with the words: **“I miss him.”**

Two ways had opened before him. He had taken the opposite one from Billy Graham.

Returning to our Old Testament passage, again the operative word, is: **Choose.**

“Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.”

This challenge still goes out today?

The people in Elijah’s day were wavering, or limping, between two opinions, and that is what many in our day are doing.

They want to hold on to bits and pieces of their Christian heritage but they also want to embrace the ways and assumptions of the world around them.

Words of James in the New Testament come to mind:

“ . . . he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.”

The dilemma of the people of Israel is our dilemma. We too must choose.

Has God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, or has He not?

If He has, we need to put our whole trust and confidence in Him. We need make Him the Lord and leader of our life. We need to follow Him day by day. We need to stand out from the world and dare to be different, even when it is unpopular.

Back some years ago a tongue-in-cheek question was making the rounds in Christian publications:

“If it were a crime to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

Why not take this question seriously?

You have been picked out of a police line- up as possibly being a Christian. Answer “guilty” or “not guilty” to the following charges:

- Using the name of Jesus Christ and trying to get others to follow him.
- Worshiping in a Christian church every Sunday.
- Openly reading and studying the Bible.
- Following Jesus’ example of helping others, including those whom society counts as cast-a-ways?
- Speaking out for Christian marriage and the family.

What about you? What about me? Would we be convicted?

Are we limping between two opinions as were the people of Elijah’s day?

A way and ways open before each one of us, and I pray that the way we choose will be the way of faithfulness and fidelity to the one who has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.

At times, following the narrow way may mean standing alone, as Elijah did on Mount Carmel in the company of the 450 prophets of Baal. But never forget, one plus God equals a mighty majority.

At times, it may mean parting ways with a friend as was the case with Billy Graham and Charles Templeton. Even so, never forget God is faithful.

I want to close with one final story. It is about a man in northern India by the name of Garo. He too had to choose whom he would serve.

The time was the middle of the 19th century. A missionary had come through, and Garo along with his wife and children had been gloriously converted.

But when the village chief found out, he demanded that they renounce their new-found faith.

They refused, and one by one were executed. The last words out of Garo’s mouth were something on the order of:

“I have decided to follow Jesus; No turning back, no turning back . . . the world behind me, the cross before me . . . no turning back, no turning back.”

I pray that these will be our words, as we as we face the challenges of our day.

I pray that we will choose not the expedient path, but the righteous path.