

Sermon – “Set Under Authority”

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:20-39 and Luke 7:1-10

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Rev. Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading tells of the prophet Elijah exhorting the people of Israel to abandon following other gods and worship only the one true God. Hear God’s Word to you in this passage from First Kings, chapter 18, verses 20 through 39:

**20** So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. **21** Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow [the Lord]; but if Baal, then follow [Baal]." The people did not answer him a word.

**22** Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty. **23** Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. **24** Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God."

All the people answered, "Well spoken!" **25** Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it." **26** So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!"

But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. **27** At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."

**28** Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. **29** As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

**30** Then 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; **31** Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name"; **32** with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. **33** Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." **34** Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time, **35** so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water. **36** At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "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. **37** 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."

**38** Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.

**39** When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."

Our Gospel reading tells us of an encounter between Jesus and an officer in the Roman military who has become a friend to the Jewish people of the town and also has heard of Jesus and come to believe in him. Hear now the words of Luke chapter 7, verses 1-10:

*1 After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. 3 When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. 4 When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, 5 for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."*

*6 And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; 7 therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. 8 For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it."*

*9 When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."*

*10 When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.*

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The title of the sermon: "Set Under Authority"

*Text: "If the Lord is God, follow the Lord ..." 1 Kings 18:21b*

In the mid-1860's, around the time of the conclusion of the Civil War, and thirty years after the founding of this church, a tradition began whose annual appearance comes around this Monday. Where, exactly, depends on whom you ask, but one theory has it that Carbondale, Illinois hosted the first observance of what was then called "Decoration Day," a day for decorating the graves of the war dead with flowers.

On Memorial Day we call to mind those who have lost their lives in war, we celebrate their sacrifice, and we mourn and regret the institution of war which took those lives from us. And as we consider those who entered "the service" and gave their lives to it, this naturally brings forth consideration of the very question of service. What, and whom, do you serve with your life? What, and whom, do I serve with mine? Both of today's scripture passages directly take up the matter of recognizing and choosing the authorities to which our allegiance, service, and trust are given.

The first reading relates the wild story of a contest which occurs when Elijah challenges the people to decide whom they will follow and challenges the prophets of Baal to demonstrate which god, theirs or his, has authority over the world and is worth following. The demonstration winds up being quite clear in its results. The other prophets try for hours to invoke their god, asking Baal to bring fire down and claim their offering by burning it up with fire, and nothing whatsoever results. Elijah, after taunting them, sets up his own offering, adds a dramatic flair by dousing it in water, then asks the Lord to answer and show Israel who is God. The Lord sends fire, not only burning up the wood and the animal sacrifice, but consuming the stones under it and licking up all the water that had been poured there as well.

The question is then answered for those people present: the authority of the God of Israel over the elements of the earth is visible and obvious, and it is contrasted with its complete opposite. The Israelite God is not, it turns out, in a contest between gods, proving which of them has the greatest *amount* of authority; rather, their God is being shown to be a God with real authority and Baal to be literally nothing at all, with authority absent altogether, and his religion pure fiction and superstition.

Luke, in our New Testament passage, tells the story of a Roman centurion who calls upon God's authority in Jesus for the healing of his slave. A centurion was a military officer who, depending on his seniority, would have had command of somewhere between one hundred and one thousand men. This would place him somewhere in the junior to mid-grade commissioned officer ranks, clearly having the chain of authority stretching some distance above him and below him.

The centurion is interesting from the beginning for his relationship with the Jews of Capernaum. Far from being resented by them as a representative of Roman power and occupation, this particular officer has become friends with the Jewish community there, has even apparently built them a synagogue. They even vouch for him when they arrive on his behalf, asking Jesus to come and heal this slave who was near death.

But the centurion's most notable characteristic, the one which impresses Jesus the most, is his faith in the simple authority of Jesus over illness. "Lord, do not trouble yourself," he says, "for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."<sup>1</sup> This depiction of the kind of authority the centurion assumes Jesus has amazes Jesus, who has not found such faith even among the people to whom he has directly been sent.

And seeing how the centurion approaches Jesus, we might be able to make a worthwhile contrast here which can help us recognize why his faith is so true, and from that to recognize what makes for truer faith in ourselves. Something that sticks out to me about the way this centurion viewed Jesus, especially when it is put next to our first reading, is that what he is doing is recognizing in Jesus a kind of simple command authority, as contrasted with seeing Jesus's healings as magical. That is, the centurion is not calling upon Jesus as a magician, but as an authority. What is the difference?

A magician wields great forces, but ultimately is someone who harnesses chaotic powers greater than he is, bending them to his own purposes. Think of how you might be able to ride and steer the movement of a great stallion by pulling the reins this way and that. It is never true for a moment that you are actually greater in strength than the animal; the power resides in the horse, and if you ever forget that you are physically no match for such a creature and take for granted your safety with it, you will likely be sorry. So it is with our conception of the magical. The magician would be one who can pull the reins, who has great knowledge of secret techniques for channeling and convincing the natural powers of the universe to do what he wishes, but who remains firmly at their mercy should he lose control of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 7:6b-8 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

Someone with true authority over something, by contrast, is not beneath it, striving to influence and harness it, but actually holds a station above it, from which to issue commands that must be obeyed. This centurion, familiar with what it means to be set under authority and to have others set under his, recognizes that Jesus holds this kind of standing with regard to the created natural world. Jesus is not a small part of the natural world who knows the secrets of inducing greater parts to do as he desires; Jesus is one whose position with respect to the world is that of owner and master,<sup>2</sup> and as his word is given, so it will be. The centurion expects that Jesus's word will be sufficient as a matter of course, and so it is.

Consider how this distinction may be also seen in our first reading. Think of the difference between all those prophets of Baal, dancing about and cutting themselves, and Elijah's way of calling upon the Lord, which does not include magical incantations or superstitious ritual, but calls upon God by straightforward request in prayer. And I believe this is an important distinction to make. Our entire religion is dismissed by a lot of people as superstition. I actually think, quite to the contrary, our faith in its pure form sits *in direct opposition* to superstition, and superstition is incompatible with it. Because human beings always suffer from the temptation to superstitious and magical thinking, the church's history (and even our own personal history, most probably) is indeed full of ways in which superstition has been injected into the practice of our faith, but this is always a corruption of it.

At its bottom, superstition is about fear, of this and of that, and the anxious just-in-case measures we throw our faith and energies into for protection. It is a form of magical thinking, and tells us we must trust in magical hopes, and when we indulge it, we are hedging on our faith in the one who really does have power over all, whose promise of salvation cannot be defeated by any of the things we insist on fearing. Can we really do both at once, superstition and faith in Christ? Elijah asked, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?"<sup>3</sup>

Here's another thing about choosing to serve the authority of superstition: it is a harsh master. Note the way in which the prophets of Baal are forced to enact ritualistic pain upon themselves, carrying on for hours and cutting and hurting themselves. It sounds strange that a master who does not exist is so harsh, but this is how superstition works on us. A power that doesn't really exist is very hard to invoke. Our idols are not really out there paying attention to our deeds, and so the rituals which are meant to invoke and control them are unreliable, and when they fail, we feel that we must be at fault, and we feel the need to purify our devotion all the more, to make it more intensified or extreme. The prophets of Baal in this story are constrained and enslaved by the severity of their desperation to invoke their God, and they are subjugated further and further by this desperation.

Contrast this with the freedom given us in the God we claim to serve. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," Paul declares in Galatians 5. To be a Christian is not to engage in magical ritual to guarantee our protection, controlling God with prayers wielded as magic formulas. We are not left, as are those relying on superstition and magic, at the mercy of our own success or failure at

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible to take this analysis deeper, regarding the specific wording used by the centurion, "I also am a man set under authority." One could read into this a recognition of the authority of Jesus actually flowing not just from him, but also through him from above, much as the centurion's own authority flows from the authority of the officers ranking above him. This would be entirely in line with Jesus's own proclamations regarding his submission to the will of the Father. (See, for instance, Matthew 20:23, Luke 4:18, John 5:19, John 7:16, John 14:25-31.)

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 18:21 (NRSV).

mastering the powers of the universe, and thereby enslaved to desperation. We are, rather, asked to engage in the free and creative act of loving our neighbors while trusting in faith that our protection is guaranteed for us by a God whose authority has declared it to be so.

It may seem odd to spend our time here today discussing such things as superstition and magical thinking, particularly in the context of the choice the Israelites were challenged with by Elijah, to choose which god to follow, since the religion of Baal is hardly a factor in contemporary American life. But I'm not sure we're really so far different as we think. We don't even always have confidence that our own religion is more than superstition, and we live in an age where a great many things, from consumerism to technology, from diets to distorted versions of our own faith, are offered to us as guarantors of bountiful lives. We are daily caught between putting our trust in one place or another, in the created works of our own hands or in the Lord we affirm in this place every week. We often try to do exactly what the Israelites did, which was to go along trying to follow all of them at once.

We then should be on the lookout for this in our lives. "No one can serve two masters."<sup>4</sup> Whom will we serve? To what authority does our allegiance belong? What do we cling to, and what do we let go of? Are we willing to cast aside the things which take God's place? Are we willing to let go of our lives themselves? It is scary, but God has authority over even life and death, and so let us not ask ourselves such questions with anxiety and panic, for anxious fear is the very thing which fuels the growth of our foolish superstitions. Rather, after the fashion of the centurion, let us simply pray: Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. But only say the word, and my soul shall be healed. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13.