

#1 Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost **The Church on Offense** 1 Kings 19:1-16, John 6:60-71

What are you doing here? Yahweh asks Elijah, “Are you still with me, or are you giving up?”

What are you doing here? Jesus asks his followers, “Are you still with me, or are you giving up?”

What are **we** doing here this morning, Mennonite Church of Normal?

Most of Israel had given up on Yahweh, and were worshiping Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility. They thought Baal would do a better job than Yahweh, at increasing their wheat yields.

Yahweh sent Elijah to call Israel to return. A battle of the prophets ensued at Mt. Carmel, and the prophets of Baal lost.

#2 Elijah, in a miraculous defeat of the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, created potential for Israel to reconcile with Yahweh.

But Jezebel threatened Elijah’s life, and he fled into the wilderness to die.

Elijah assumed this dramatic win for Yahweh, would bring King Ahab back to Yahweh. But it didn’t. Ahab was not really in charge. His wife, Jezebel, was actually running things. And Jezebel had an ongoing vendetta against Elijah.

In his role as Yahweh’s prophet, Elijah had put up with a lot. He went from one crisis to another, risking his life for Yahweh. When things finally looked good for a change, he was hopeful. But Jezebel’s threat was the last straw. Elijah walked. He left his servant at Beersheba, and entered the wilderness alone, to die.

Yahweh had not given up on Elijah. An angel woke him up with bread and water--twice.

#3 An angel brought him bread & water. He entered a cave. In the morning the word of the Lord came: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” “I’ve done what you told me to do. And now, they want to kill me.” The word of the Lord: “The Lord is about to pass by.”

With renewed energy, Elijah walked 40 days, to Mt. Horeb—another name for Mt. Sinai, where Yahweh gave Moses the Law. Elijah entered a cave, where the word of the Lord came to him: What are you doing here, Elijah?

Elijah answers with a quarterly report of his prophetic efforts: “I did what you told me to do. I took on the prophets of Baal, and defeated them. But I alone am left.”

Elijah was not being fully transparent. The victory at Carmel resulted in many in Israel returning to Yahweh. Elijah was **not** alone. But with Jezebel’s threat, he **felt** alone.

Yahweh doesn’t fact check him, but just responds: “I am about to pass by.” A great wind, earthquake and fire followed. But no Yahweh. Then

sheer silence. After a while, Yahweh asked again, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

#4 A great wind, earthquake, fire...but the Lord was not in them.

Then, after sheer silence: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

“I’ve done what you told me to do. And now, they want to kill me.”

Elijah repeats his same, woe is me report. Yahweh gives Elijah a new assignment: Appoint three new leaders—the last one, Elisha, will be your successor

#5 The Lord said, “Go to the wilderness of Damascus, and appoint three new leaders, one being your successor.”

And Elijah follows through.

The parallels to the exodus from Egypt are striking. King Ahab is Pharaoh, desiring to keep Israel enslaved. Elijah is the new Moses, called to set Israel free. After leading the Children through many trials in the wilderness, Moses’ completes his prophetic call, and is followed by Joshua.

The writer to the Hebrews begins the letter with:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

Jesus, the new Moses, is God’s definitive prophet—calling Israel to recognize that God’s Reign is now here—in him.

#6 Jn 6:57-58 “Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

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These words summarize Jesus’ teaching that he is “the bread of life, sent by God. It is this audacious declaration that caused many of his followers to walk away.

They said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

#7 John 6:60-61 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you?”

The teaching was not difficult to understand. It was crystal clear: total commitment. It was difficult to *accept*. Jesus was calling for unequivocal belief in him, that he was sent by God—The Bread from Heaven. Jesus set the bar so high, that many disciples walked. They had had enough. They were offended by Jesus’ demand.

#8 John 6:66-68 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Peter: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Jesus tests the Twelve: Do you also wish to go away? Is this getting to be too much commitment?

Peter, speaking for the disciples, responded: Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." This is hard, but we have no other options. We will keep following you.

Evil is real. I have seen it. I assume many of you have. There will always be Jezebel's, intent on destroying God's people. There will always be religious and political leaders, intent on maintaining power, not matter what suffering that brings for others.

Jesus warns about such persecutions, throughout the 10th chapter of Matthew, concluding in v. 34:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Ouch! We want to hear about peace, not swords.

Those who believe in Jesus as being sent from God, become part of God's Reign on earth, as it is in heaven. Promoting God's Reign, will bring out opposition—it is a spiritual battle.

Peter Leithart, in his commentary on 1 Kings asks:

#9 Why do the church's enemies have to pick a fight just when things get rolling? Peter Leithart

Why do the church's enemies have to pick a fight just when things get rolling? That was Elijah's question. Things were looking up...finally. But no, Jezebel was literally hell bent on destroying Yahweh's prophet. Why does evil have to pick a fight, just when things are looking up?

Leithart answers his question:

#10 Why do the church's enemies have to pick a fight just when things get rolling? Peter Leithart They don't. The church is to be on offense.

They don't. The church is to be on offense. It's not evil that picks the fight. The church picks the fight, by being the church. The church is to do harm to injustice, and evil.

Ouch. We don't like to hear that kind of language. The late representative, John Lewis put it a little more diplomatically: *Never, ever be afraid to make some noise, and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.*

#11 Inherent in the gospel is the condemnation of this world... when we preach such a gospel, we cannot help but start a fight. -Peter Leithart

Leithart continues: *Inherent in the gospel is the condemnation of this world... when we preach such a gospel, we cannot help but start a fight.*

Ouch again. Can we avoid that word condemnation? It's so not politically correct.

But Jesus does not call us to condemn people—Jesus calls us to be on offense against the evil which manifests itself in injustice, and inequity, and abuse of power, and destruction of the environment—whatever forces which oppose God’s Reign. Here’s the key:

#12 The Church is not called to be offensive.

The Church is called to be on offense.

We are called to be on offense against evil. We are not called to be offensive. Some Christians confuse the two.

Our two texts, remind us that by following Jesus, we are always on offense. As ambassadors of Christ, on earth, as it is in heaven, as those who recognize spiritual realities in all of life—we can expect evil to react. It will be relentless, as it was for Elijah and Jesus. But God will sustain us through the battles with evil.

#13 What does a congregation on offense for God’s Reign look like?

What does a congregation on offense look like?

Living Water Community Church, an Illinois Mennonite Conference congregation on Chicago’s northside Rogers Park neighborhood, took on evil very intentionally. A few gathered every Saturday night, rain, sleet or snow, for two years, to pray on a corner where four youth had been killed in gun violence over the previous year. I was there several times as my commuting schedule allowed. They prayed specifically for God’s Reign to prevail in that place. And it did. They went on offense against evil.

Rosa Parks went on offense against evil, remaining seated on that Montgomery bus. Civil rights leaders went on offense against evil, in their non-violent march across the Edmond Pettus bridge in Selma.

A conference minister, recognizing evil at work in a congregational conflict, came early to a meeting, and prayed as he walked around the large meeting place seven times. God’s Reign broke through that night.

Paul writes in Eph. 6:12: For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

What **are** we doing here?