

Trash-Talking Prophet
 Reading from the New Testament: Ephesian 4:1-6
 Reading from the Old Testament: 1 Kings 18:1-3, 17-39

Basketball icon Kobe Bryant won 5 NBA championships with the Los Angeles Lakers. In a celebrated encounter with a diehard Chicago Bulls fan named Barack Obama, the President attempted to goad Bryant by saying that the Bull's rising megastar, Derrick Rose, might just have Kobe's number; to which Kobe replied, "If he calls that number, I'll be sure to pick up after the fifth ring." That's cold!

Most of us would covet the ability and the sense of timing to trash talk so brilliantly; to be able to instantaneously respond with acerbic wit to the slings, arrows, and aspersions thrust toward us. For me, by the time the creative juices get flowing, the moment is long past. If only I could remove the regulator from my wit accelerator. Consider Gandhi, who was once asked by a reporter, *Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western Civilization?* Gandhi's answer? *I think it would be a good idea.* Or consider the flight attendant who once asked Muhammad Ali to put on his seatbelt before takeoff. Ali protested; *Superman don't need no seatbelt.* The flight attendant's answer? *Superman don't need no airplane, either.*

However, the trash talker takes a great risk, for such verbal bravado can come back to bite you as we will see in the case of Elijah, the revered and feared prophet of Israel. Today, we are looking at the stunning showdown between the prophet of God and the 450 prophets of Baal during the notoriously corrupt reign of Ahab and Jezebel in the northern Semitic kingdom of Israel. Of Ahab, the author of 1 Kings says, “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.” And that’s saying something, because a number of his predecessors were miscreants, felons, and malefactors.

Ahab’s primary sin was his unfaithfulness to the God of Israel, shifting his loyalty to Jezebel’s preferred deity, the Canaanite god known as Baal. It is important here to note that Israel, with its agricultural economy, was in the midst of a drought; and if you’ve ever known a farmer, taunting them with the word drought is akin to giving a toddler a ticket to see *It, Chapter Two*. Horrors! Before there was internet, my farming father-in-law had one of those little weather radios: one station; one subject; weather – day, night, Spring, Fall, in the mornin’, in the evenin’, ain’t we got clouds.

Drought is the *evil not to be named* in front of the farmer. Israel's drought was significant in this story because the myth was that Baal was a weather god associated with thunderstorms. The legend was that Baal appointed the season of rain. Clouds were part of his entourage. Lightning was his weapon. The windows of Baal's palace corresponded to openings in the clouds through which rain flowed. Baal's consort was Asherah, known as Lady Asherah of the sea, and you remember the diagrams in second grade science with the moisture from the sea rising and forming clouds producing the rain to water the earth, so it was a good partnership.

Well, Jezebel was all in, inviting the prophets of Asherah to dine regularly at her table and instructing Ahab to build an altar to Baal. And Ahab had learned to do what Jezebel told him to do. After all, she had not hesitated to exterminate Israel's prophets, so obedience sounded better than embalming.

Enter Elijah, the Tishbite, having been instructed by the Lord to appear before Ahab, calling on Ahab to assemble the 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Ahab sees Elijah approaching and senses he is about to get caught between the iron wills of Elijah and Jezebel. "Is that

you, you troubler of Israel?” To which Elijah responds, *Hey, don't look at me. You brought this onto yourself.* Elijah possesses the inside information that the drought is about to end, but he wants to make it clear through whom the drought comes to an end, echoing the promise of the Lord in Leviticus, “I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.”

To remove any ambiguity and establish the illegitimacy of Baal, Elijah dares the 450 Baal prophets to demonstrate the efficacy of their appeals to their god. The only thing missing now is one of those dudes they pay to announce the fights in Las Vegas. *In this corner, weighing in at 132 pounds, from the backwater, hillbilly town of Tishbe, the pouncing prophet of Israel ... Eeeelijah! And in this corner, numbering 450, are the praying prophets of Baaaal, the sultan of storms, the legate of lightning!*

Elijah addresses the crowd, "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."

So, the Baal prophets chose a bull and prepared it for offering, proffering pleas to Baal from morning to noon. The text says, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made."

One controversy in the recent World Series was the sight of two batters, having hit home runs, carrying their bats with them all the way to first base. You don't do that. Not in baseball. It's not a rule. You're not officially penalized for excessive celebration as in football; but baseball has a code, a code that if broken may well lead to a 100-mph fastball in your ear the next time you go to bat. Well, Elijah ignored whatever code there was when it came to religious sacrifices, and in the parlance of the modern athlete, he got up in their business and disrespected them.

“Yo, wassup! Won’t Baal take your call? Dude’s not home, maybe.”

Elijah goes so far as to suggest that Baal may have “gone aside,” which is a euphemism for standing in line at the porta-potty.

Now, the text will reveal that God would prevail and Baal would fail. But it is important for us to note the cautionary tale here. Elijah mixes the power of the Lord with his own pride, sort of like the Carolina fan taunting the Duke fan as if he’s the Tarheel who made the clutch shot. Would that he was called into the game. The taunting would quickly turn to terror. Elijah’s all bravado here, but in the next chapter, he’s running like a scared rabbit away from the wrath of Jezebel. And so it is that Paul warns, “do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

In any case, back at the showdown, the Baal prophets raved on until evening, but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

With this, Elijah says, “Hold my beer.” He gets busy setting up his own offering to the God of Israel, but first, he has to rebuild the altar

that through neglect had fallen into disrepair, a sign of the divided loyalties and misplaced priorities of the people (*might make it a good text for the capital campaign*). Elijah organizes the altar and prepares the bull, ironically preparing it in a way that would make it nigh impossible to succeed. Unless you lived in Cleveland in the 60s, you know fire and water don't go together. And yet, at Elijah's prayer, "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.'

The bankruptcy of Baal is exposed. The power of the living God is revealed. God is God. Baal is no god. As the Psalmist proclaims, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side —let Israel now say ... when our enemies attacked us, 3 then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us ... Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Before the big showdown, Elijah came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the

Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And here, the text tells us, "The people did not answer him a word."

It is a timeless challenge, certainly relevant today in a world, in a culture, in a suburb where there is always an overflowing inbox of products, programs, strategies, lifestyle consultants, social media *influencers*, designers, decorators, pills, workouts, and gadgets that promise to be your personal panacea, healing your malaise, transforming your lives, and taking you to the Promised Land.

I looked through a list of trends and was impressed by the lengths to which people will go to be an entrepreneur, because most of those product and program promises are a whole lot more about money than your well-being. How about a muscle-massaging water bottle, to cover two essential needs in one for the fitness addict? Maybe a home-gym smart mirror will create a new you, the mirror-mirror on the wall reminding you at intervals that, yes, you are the fairest of all. Perhaps what your home truly needs is an AI-powered litter box. Yes, the folks at Sharp have developed a Smart Litter Box for ensuring healthy cats.

Haven't found your panacea yet? Do not fear, you could always try *ear seeding*! Tiny 24-Karat gold seeds magnetically putting pressure on selected points in your ear. Back pain? Gone. Sleep? Comes easily. Stress? What, me worry? We are regularly seduced by any number of Baals through the seasons of each year, while correspondingly neglecting the grace that is already present through our singular Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." The prophet Isaiah says, "everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy ... Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."

Whether we are talking about the days of Ahab or the days of Donald, we have never ceased grasping at Baals seeking that which only God can give. May the Lord grant us ears to hear the apostolic

plea, “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Amen.