

I

Just say no. As a child coming of age as our nation continued to fight the so-called War on Drugs, those words were drilled into my consciousness. Just say no.

The message was simple, clear, and direct. If someone were to ever offer you drugs, just say no. That slogan was everywhere, on bumper stickers and T-shirts and buttons for your denim jacket. In my mind, the scenario would play out like this. I'd be walking down the street when some shady character would pop out of a dark alley and say, "Hey kid, wanna buy some drugs?" And then I would remember to "Just say no" and go on happily about my business.

But the lived experience turned out to be far different. In my entire childhood, no one ever popped out of an alley and offered me drugs. The drugs weren't in dark alleys – they were in the locker rooms and bathrooms and cafeterias and parking lots of my school. The ones offering the drugs weren't cartoon-like characters. They were kids I knew, kids who'd grown up in the same neighborhoods, who'd gone to the same elementary schools, who'd played on the same sports teams.

Now, I don't want to alarm you. Most of the kids I knew were not involved in this stuff. Most of us went on to become leaders in all kinds of fields. But the truth is that everyone who had any sense knew what was going on, but we kept silence about it. We didn't have a meeting and make a

collective decision; it just sort of became the default position. No one wanted to be called a "narc" – for that was tantamount to social suicide. So we kept our mouths shut and our heads down. It was just safer and easier that way.

II

But that impulse, to keep our heads down and our mouths shut, even when we know something is not right, stays with us, doesn't it? Deep down, we are social creatures, and no one wants to be cast out of the herd for daring to speak up.

Besides, as we become adults, the consequences become more than just social. We don't want to risk being labeled a troublemaker, because such a label might have dire economic and personal consequences. Daring to be the one person to raise our voice and call the powers that be to account might cost us a job, or a career, or in some extreme cases, even a life.

We might not condone what's going on. We might even condemn it privately and in social circles that we deem to be safe. But it's far easier and safer to go along to get along, rather than being the one to step out of line.

III

And that brings us to our text for today. As most of you know, this fall, we've been tracing the broad outline of the Hebrew Bible, also commonly called the Old Testament. And for the last few weeks we've been talking about the kings of ancient Israel. And as we've

seen, by and large, Scripture takes a dim view of the concept of a king.

Last week, we read the story of King Rehoboam who reigned over ancient Israel about 1,000 years before the birth of Christ. When the people came to him and asked him to alleviate their hard labor and lighten their tax burden, he said to them, “Quit whining. You thought my father King Solomon was a tough guy? He punished you with whips, but I will punish you with scorpions.”

And when the people heard Rehoboam’s response, the nation split in two. Ten of the original twelve tribes of Israel split off to form what we now refer to as the Northern Kingdom, and they rejected Rehoboam’s leadership and named their own king. It’s a little confusing, because the Northern Kingdom continued to call themselves Israel, but the southern kingdom over which Rehoboam continued to rule became known as Judah. So about 1,000 years before the birth of Christ, the once unified nation in two – with two different capital cities, two different palaces, two different kings.

Our story for today is set in the Northern Kingdom, and it’s about 55 years after the split. Five northern kings have come and gone, and the current king is named Ahab.

And Scripture says this about Ahab: *Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of*

*Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. Ahab also made a sacred pole. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel before him.*

So here the king has gone and built an altar not for the God of Israel, the God of his ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but for a Canaanite storm god named Baal. And he’s built this altar right there in his capital city of Samaria.

Ahab did more to provoke the anger of God than had all the other kings before him. And Ahab’s wife Jezebel demonstrated that she was willing to crush anyone who dared speak against her or Baal. But along comes this pesky prophet named Elijah.

And so with that background in mind, now listen for a Word from God from 1 Kings 18:17-39.

*When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” He answered, “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”*

*So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. 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 him; but if Baal, then follow him." The people did not answer him a word. 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. 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. 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!" 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." 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. 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." Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. 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.*

*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; 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"; 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. 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." 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, so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.*

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

It would have been safer for Elijah to keep his mouth shut. He was outnumbered 450-1, and the king and queen were out to get him, but Elijah had decided it was time to take a stand, come what may.

The text doesn't tell us, but I wonder if Elijah's loud trash talking was to cover the sound of his shaking knees. Where is your god? Elijah asks. Perhaps he is "meditating," which is a Hebrew euphemism for sitting on the throne.

It would have been easier and safer for Elijah to keep his mouth shut and his head down. But he took a stand on Mount Carmel, ready for whatever might come.

#### IV

My friend, I think and pray about you more than you may know. I am aware of how much harder it is for you to stand on Mount Carmel than it is for me and Carol and Margaret and all of us clergy who are the so-called "Professional Christians." People still expect, to a certain extent, I hope, for pastors to speak up when there are moral and ethical issues at stake.

But you are under so much pressure to keep your head down and your mouth shut. You are under so much pressure to go along to get along. I know you're not one of the prophets of Baal. I know you don't condone what's going on all around you, but you're

under so much pressure to not answer a word, for fear of losing your job, or your career, or the next election, or a friendship, or, perhaps, even your life. And I know it feels like the odds are 450-1 against you.

But you are not alone, nor are you the first one to take a stand for the cause of righteousness on the Mount Carmels of this life. Today is All Saints' Sunday, and on this day we remember that as we run this race that Christ has marked out for us, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have finished the race, who rest from their labors, who cheer us on.

You are not alone. You are being cheered on by Elijah and Moses. You are being cheered on by Ruth and Naomi. You are being cheered on by Leta Cobb, and Harold Maxwell, and Everett Jones. You are being cheered on by those saints who have taught you about the things in this life that are good, and pleasing, and honorable, and worthy of praise, those who have taught you about how much God loves you in Jesus Christ, who once saw only as in a mirror dimly, but who now see God face to face, who once knew God only in part, but now know God fully, even as they have been fully known.

When you come to the next Mount Carmel in your life, my friend, when you find yourself called to take a stand in the name of the Most High God, even if it feels like the odds are 450-1 and the very gates of hell are coming against you, you are never, ever alone.

## V

I would be remiss, though, friends, if I did not point out that this text is not to be used as an example of how to engage in interfaith dialogue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We must read it carefully, because this text has been used by our ancestors in faith as a basis for religious warfare, as justification for doing violence in the name of God.

I had the opportunity to travel to the Middle East two summers ago, and I came home more convinced than ever that if our human family is going to survive, we are going to have to learn how to engage peacefully with sisters and brothers of other faiths.

This story is not about Christianity versus Judaism versus Islam versus Hinduism versus Atheism. This text is about us, right here, in this house, and the ways in which we have either explicitly endorsed or silently assented to the worship and veneration of things that are not of God. Elijah's question is aimed squarely at us. "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?"

This text is a call for us to repent of silence, to repent of the ways in which we just went along to get along, to repent of the ways in which all too often we have chosen expediency over faithfulness.

This text is a call to the people of God to repent from the worship of false gods. We are not called to worship at the altar of the Baals. Nor are we to

worship at the altar of the Elephant or the Donkey.

We are not called to put our trust in princes, in mortals, in who there is no help.

We are called to worship at the altar of the Lamb, Jesus the Christ, who is the crucified and risen king: of his kingdom, there will be no end.

Thanks be to God.