

“The Show Me” People

There are many names given to those people we learn about from Hebrew Scriptures. They are called the children of Abraham, the chosen people, the children of God, just to mention a few. God also calls them a stiff necked people. Those people described in the texts carry some of the same names that we call ourselves. And in many ways, we are very like them. When I prepared to preach on this text for the first time three years ago, I used the same title that I used today: without this introduction and with some variations. However, I am going to explain the title in the same way. The title comes from an experience I had when in graduate school studying an entirely different field. There was a fellow student who originally came from Missouri but had graduated from Virginia Tech. I don't often think in terms of stereotypes, but Sally was so proud of being from Missouri that she was always talking about it as being the “show me” state. Now for some reason I interpreted that as meaning that those folks from Missouri were open and interested in learning from others. Over a vacation period, Sally could not fly home so I invited her to come home with me. We decided to take a side trip into the mountains and see the fall colors along the Blue Ridge Parkway. As we were driving I made a casual remark about the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains being a part of the Appalachian Mountain chain. That's the point at which Sally demonstrated that she wanted to live into her state's nickname. She told me I was wrong. According to Sally, the Appalachian chain ended in Virginia and West Virginia mountains—it didn't cross into North Carolina. We stopped at an overlook on the Parkway near Asheville. While there I spotted a map and pointed out to her that it clearly labeled the mountains surrounding us as being part of the Appalachians. We were definitely in North Carolina—heading south. So much for my thought about what being a “show me” people meant. Even being shown doesn't always work. That is what brought this story to mind in connection to this text as God's people even being shown didn't seem to work—at least not for long. Our passage is from 1 Kings, long after God had brought the people out of Egypt and slavery to the Promised Land with many acts of power. The Hebrew texts are full of the things which God did to show the people the truth of God's sovereignty and righteousness. It seems that most of what is recorded involved God showing the people of Israel that they belonged to God and thus there were some things expected of them; things integral to being a chosen or covenant people. Those things described in the Hebrew text as the commandments of their God for example; those items forming the basis of how they were to live in relationship with God and with each other, part of which we call the Ten Commandments. Within the text before us this morning we have a great example of another “show them” event. The passage begins with Elijah asking the people assembled at Mount Carmel a simple question: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God; follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” It doesn't say how many ordinary folk are there, but supposedly the request which had been for all the Israelites as well as 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah so the crowd would have been in the thousands. Ahab's rule of the divided Northern Kingdom follows in the manner of his predecessors who established sites at Bethel and Dan where images of golden calves were worshiped. Ahab actually rules for 22 years which was rare in Israel at that time. Archeological evidence

indicates that it was a time of wealth for the nation where Israel's kings exerted a lot of political influence. But the Biblical view as it is summed up in 1 Kings 16:30 is—"Ahab, son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all those who were before him." Some of those evils are summed up in chapter 16: Ahab married a foreign princess named Jezebel who worshiped the god of her country—Baal. Ahab built a temple to Baal in his capital city of Samaria—and he compounded this by also worshipping there. He also allowed the rebuilding of Jericho which had been forbidden by the Lord according to Joshua 6:26. These acts set the stage for the separation of the people from God. Ahab was just determined to go his own way ignoring the Lord's way. He did not pursue these actions without being warned. Elijah had given him the message that the Lord would send a drought to Israel because of all these violations of the commandments and the Baal worship. It is now 3 years into that drought. So when Elijah issued his Joshua-like challenge to the people, someone should have said something affirming they were God's chosen people. No one did. The text says, "They did not answer him a word. Evidently the Lord's actions toward their ancestors no longer had the power to "show them" anything, nor has the drought. When Elijah first encounters Ahab three years into the drought to call for this assembly of the people, Ahab has called him a troubler of Israel—Elijah answers that it is Ahab's actions which have caused the trouble. After receiving no response from the people Elijah now turns his attention to all those gathered prophets of Baal with a second challenge. Beginning with verse 22: "Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets number 450.'" Already you can see Elijah's flair setting up a drama for his audience of gathered Israelites. "Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it into pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it." Thus Elijah sets the stage to maximize the effects of his demonstration. He is only one, they are many; they get to choose the bull for the sacrifice and go first. Elijah says he will also prepare his bull and lay it on the wood with no fire. Then the prophets will call on their god to send fire from heaven to burn the sacrificed animal. This will prove the reality and power of their god. Elijah invites them to go first, and they begin. Again the text presents a dramatic scene with verse 26: "So they took the bull that was given to 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." Now Elijah begins to add some extra fuel to this challenge. In verse 27 he begins to mock 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." This taunting caused the Baal prophets to cry even louder, go so far as to cut themselves with swords and lances. But also fails to bring a response even though it is now evening. Elijah then takes control of the situation by repairing the torn down altar to the Lord, placing the sacrificed animal on it and then having a trench dug around the altar. He then has water poured on the wood, soaking it so thoroughly that the water runs off the wood and fills the trench. Elijah has complete faith that he will receive an answer. Elijah's prayer to the Lord is a simple request: "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." The answer from the Lord comes forcefully with a fire from heaven that not only lights the wet wood and consumes the sacrifice, but also the stones and the water in the trench. This is very definitely a "show them" moment. And the people respond by declaring: "The Lord indeed is God; the

Lord is indeed God.” Often when discussing this passage in Bible study, someone will remark about how strange it is that those who experienced the events in Scripture keep forgetting those events and what they meant. The question for us is since we also have the Scriptures describing all these events, are we any different from the Israelites? Do we not still seem to require that God “show us”? Are we not still worshipping the Baals of our time—status, possessions, money, and power? The Israelites knew their history, but chose to go another way which took them away from the Lord and the community they were intended to be. Elijah knew the history and remained a servant of the Lord. He followed the instructions which the Lord gave to him. The life he lived was not an easy one, but he persevered with trust and confidence. We have the same type of decisions to make. We often tend to try to “limp along with two opinions” like Elijah told the Israelites they were doing. We know what type of community Jesus wanted to form, one of compassion, reconciliation and healing. In the passage from Luke, we have a scene where Jesus returns to Capernaum after teaching the multitudes by the shore of Galilee. These teachings are known as the Sermon on the Mount. From today’s text we have a Roman soldier, a commander, who has been a friend to the Jewish Community in Capernaum. He has not heard the sermon Jesus gave, but he has a slave whom he values who is seriously ill. The Centurion sends a message to Jesus through the elders of the Jewish community asking for help. Jesus starts to the home of the Centurion, but the Centurion’s actions indicate he places such trust in Jesus’ healing powers that he sends others to tell Jesus he knows it is not necessary for Jesus to actually come. “Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” Jesus turns to the crowd following him and comments on the deep faith of the Centurion, and the servant is indeed healed at a distance. The Centurion evidently did not need a “show me” moment. Which example from the Scriptures which we have been given do we actually follow? Are we a “show me” people or are we a people of faith who trust in the Lord and accept that we are sent into the world to live according to the teachings of Jesus? In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.