

Of Conflicts & Memorials
1 Kings 18:20-39
Colebrook Congregational Church
May 29, 2016 / 2nd Sunday After Pentecost / Memorial Day

The situation behind what is happening in this week's selection needs a quick history, to give context.

When Moses led the Israelites to the Promised Land, they did not form a kingdom, but a Confederation of the Twelve Tribes, who were autonomous in their own areas, and would unite temporarily under a judge, like Deborah or Samson, in times of emergency.

Eventually, the people demanded that God allow them to have a single leader. Remember the Story of David & Goliath? At that time, a man named Saul was anointed as the first king of a united kingdom of Israel. He was succeeded by that David who slew Goliath. His son was Solomon, who we know as the wise king, and his famous story is about how he decided who the true mother of a baby was.

However, when Solomon's son, Rehoboam ascended to the throne, one of Solomon's old ministers, Jeroboam, led a rebellion of the ten northern tribes, who formed their own kingdom, centered in the city of Samaria and known as either the Northern Kingdom of Israel, or the Kingdom of Samaria. The other two tribes stayed loyal to the son of Solomon, still centered in Jerusalem and then known as the Kingdom of Judah. After decades of border conflicts, the two kingdoms did work together against common threats.

These two kingdoms were surrounded by enemies and the political leaders did what they had to in attempts to survive. This included marriages of alliance with other kingdoms, with spouses bringing their own religions with them, leading to toleration of non-Jewish worship within the kingdoms' borders.

The Prophets in the Bible are associated with either of the two kingdoms and they are constantly chastising them for their lack of faith in the primacy of Yahweh. In fact, only one king in the history of both kingdoms, is described as having been good and faithful. He was Josiah. Another one, Hezekiah,

was described as not that bad.

So we have Elijah, an important prophet active in the Northern Kingdom. He is one of two people in the Bible described as ascending to Heaven without dying; he is the awaited Messiah in Judaism, that extra place setting at Shabbat meals & Passover, it's for Elijah; We Christians see him as the exemplar of Biblical prophets, appearing with Moses at the Transfiguration of Jesus; and today's story of conflict with the priests of Baal is recounted in the Koran.

So what has happened to cause this ruckus was that Ahab, king of Samaria, or the Northern Kingdom of Israel, married a Phoenician princess and priestess, named Jezebel. This marriage brought security and economic prosperity to the Kingdom. However, the policies of the northern kings were contrary to the Law of Moses. They had encouraged movement away from a focus on the Temple in Jerusalem; they allowed local altars for sacrifices; appointed priests who were not from the Tribe of Levi, and allowed or encouraged temples dedicated to a Canaanite deity named Baal and also to an ancient goddess associated with primitive Canaanite, Sumerian, and Hebrew cultures named Asherah, who is depicted as the consort of the deity in each of those cultures.

Queen Jezebel brought hundreds of prophets of Baal and Asherah with her into the Northern Kingdom. This did not sit well with Elijah and he spoke out against this, warning King Ahab that there will be a severe drought in the land because Ahab was allowing the worship of false deities. King Ahab called Elijah, The Troubler of Israel. Elijah responded by berating Ahab and the People of Israel for being ambivalent about the worship of Baal. Pick one or the other he said.

Then, he issued a challenge. He challenged the hundreds of prophets of Baal and Asherah to essentially a God-off. Whose God is more powerful? They assembled at Mount Carmel, a holy site going back millenia, transcending many cultures.

Once there, two identical altars were built. Wood was laid upon both, and two oxen were sacrificed, the pieces were laid upon the wood. Elijah invited the 850 followers of Baal and Asherah to go first, praying for their deity to light their altar. They do so from morning to noon with no success. Elijah gets sassy and ridicules them. Yell louder, maybe Baal can't hear you! They mutilated themselves, adding their own blood to the mix, something forbidden by the Law of Moses. Though it is not recorded, I feel certain that Elijah's heckling continued throughout the day.

In the evening, Elijah has twelve large jarloads of water poured over the offering to Yahweh. He alone then just asks Yahweh to accept the offering, and it is immediately consumed in fire from above. The sacrifice, the wood, the altar...everything. My Irish Catholic Old Testament professor joked at this point, maybe that wasn't water that they poured over it.

Anyway, the assembled Samaritans, seeing this, choose Yahweh over Baal and Asherah. Elijah challenged the people of the Northern Kingdom to stop their ambivalence and choose one or the others. For me, this is the amazing thing about this story. Nobody was forced to do anything. People came, they saw, they converted. It was their choice to do so. This is in stark contrast to much of history, where people were force to convert or be re-educated. Even in a more violent time, a choice was given. They were being asked to make a choice, to be faithful or not to God...and God hopes we all choose God.

Nearly a millenia later, people were asked to choose Jesus. Every week, we celebrate the sacrifice Jesus made for us all, but this weekend, we also celebrate Memorial Day, which started as a consolidation of many similar holidays that commemorated the Civil War. There was a huge fervor at the beginning of that War, but of a different kind, leading to many to volunteer to fight, on both sides. This day is to remember the sacrifice of those who fought for us.

The story I have today is about one of my ancestors, my great-great-great-grandfather, Sanford Alvah Smith.

On August 4, 1862, after the Union disasters of the Peninsula Campaign,

President Lincoln called for more troops. In response, Sanford enlisted in the 16th Regiment of the Vermont Volunteer Infantry as the Drummer Boy of Company B. It was a nine month regiment, serving from October 1862 to August 1863, primarily in the defense of Washington, D.C. However, in late June, they were ordered to march after the Army of Northern Virginia to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

On the second day of the Battle, the 16th was deployed as skirmishers on Cemetery Ridge, facing off against General A. P. Hill, outnumbered five to one. They were sent to reinforce the Union troops and retake the skirmish line. Sanford's Company was then ordered to go plug a hole in the line and they stayed out in a ditch between the two armies, miraculously surviving repeated attacks.

The third day of the Battle was Pickett's Charge. As soon as it was light, the Confederate artillery started to fire at the Union lines. At around 1pm, hundreds of cannons in a line over 2 miles long opened fire on the Union center...right where Sanford's Company was positioned in support of a Union battery. Imagine what that would have been like.

Sanford's Captain wrote in a letter:

Imagine the heaviest thunder you ever heard, and have it continued for about six hours without a moments cessation, and added to that the crash and whizzing of showers of solid shot and shells that were bursting and cutting the air just over our backs as we lay on the ground, each one expecting that his turn to be hurried out of the world would come next, and you will have but a faint idea of the suspense we were in lying there with a boiling sun pouring down upon us to add to our troubles.

Then the Charge began. 12,500 soldiers started marching out in a mile-long front, across a field three quarters of a mile long, all focused on one spot. Right where Sanford was. While he watched thousands of soldiers march right at him, he probably saw his comrades from the rest of the Regiment march out into the field between two Confederate brigades and flank them both. And then Armisted's Brigade broke the Union line at the Angle.

Positioned by the adjacent Copse of Trees, Sanford was right there at the High Water Mark, and his Company was among the units that charged into the breach.

After the Battle, they returned to Vermont and mustered out. Stories passed down in my family tell of how he was a different person when he came back. One can only imagine what he saw and endured. But Sanford came from a large family, having nine siblings, so he did have a support system. He returned to woodworking in Guilford, got married, and then he started his own factory, the S. A. Smith Company, where he spent the rest of his life building children's toys.

It is not only life that is sacrificed by our country's servicepeople. Innocence. Health. Sanity. Sanford was lucky, but other veterans are not so lucky. Not just on this day of remembrance, but every day, as we feel the presence and fervor of the Holy Spirit in our life, we should remember those, past and present, who have sacrificed for us, and do what we can, when they are in need.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

We have come before God, not to glorify conflicts, but to honor and celebrate those who walked into the chaos and evil that is war: those who were civilians and those who were military; those who survived and those who did not; those who were friends and those who were enemies. None who have waded through evil and sorrow are untouched in body, mind or spirit; they are all beloved of God. We all were affected and changed by conflicts and all are in need of comfort and healing. Amen.

Prayers of the People

[PAUSE]

Loving God, We ask for the gift of your Holy Spirit to help us pray as we ought. We ask for the energy and vision of your Spirit for those who are tiring in the battle against injustice and oppression; for those exhausted by the struggle with poverty and hunger. We ask for the hope and comfort of your Spirit for those whose lives are overshadowed by illness or pain; for those whose lives are darkened by sorrow or bereavement. We ask for the peace and joy of your Spirit for those living in the shadow of war and violence; for those eaten up by guilt and anxiety and whose life has become hard and dry. We ask for the guidance and strength of your Spirit for those uncertain how to use their time, talents and gifts; for those tempted to do what is wrong. We ask for the love and courage of your Spirit for those reaching out to comfort the distressed; for those reaching out to others with the Good News. Loving God, We ask for the assurance of your Spirit to know your presence with us in our daily lives; in our relationships; in our work and service; in our worship; in our times of joy and pain. We especially pray for:

God of power and mercy, you destroy war and put down earthly pride. Banish violence from our midst and wipe away our tears, that we may all deserve to be called your sons and daughters. Keep in your mercy those men and women who have died in the cause of freedom and bring them safely into your kingdom of justice and peace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

1 Kings 18:20-39

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."

Psalm 96:1-9

96:1 O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.

96:2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

96:3 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

96:4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.

96:5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

96:6 Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

96:7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

96:8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts.

96:9 Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.