

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“Choices”**

**A sermon by Katie Owen**

**9<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)**

**June 2, 2013**

**1 Kings 18:20–21, 30–39**

---

Life is full of choices. The fact that you made it to the precise spot where you are sitting this morning means that you made a variety of choices. Some of them were mundane choices: What should I wear today? Cheerios or eggs for breakfast? Coffee or tea? Red shirt or blue shirt? These might be calculated decisions: perhaps you consulted weather.com or you checked to see which shirt was clean or opened the box of cheerios and realized someone had put it back in the pantry empty, but on the whole these were easy decisions to make.

Some of the choices you made were more significant: should I go to worship this morning? Or should I go to brunch at Rue Cler or Geer Street? Or should I sleep in and attend “Pillow Presbyterian?” I have worked awfully hard this week... plus there’s a guest preacher, maybe it’s a perfect week to skip! Perhaps you are here out of guilt, or simple routine, or because your parents forced you, but I suspect most of you, like me, chose to come to worship because you are looking for—hoping for—a glimpse of the holy, a recognition that God is present and active in this world, an opportunity for relationship with a covenant community bound together by Christ. And that relationship invites you to choose over and over each Sunday to continue to invest time and energy. Though your reasons may vary, your presence in worship this morning required you to make a choice that this time is important.

For those of you about to graduate, your year has undoubtedly been full of significant choices. Am I going to college or should I take a gap year? Where

should I apply to school? You probably weighed all kinds of factors from classes and majors to the feel of a campus, cost and financial aid. Maybe you thought about where your friends were attending or how important was it to be close to home. Do you want a big school or small school? Public or private? Perhaps you bought one of those giant Princeton Review books with a survey of 500 universities to choose between. You weighed all these factors and then you wrote essays and personal statements to “wow” college admissions staff and you spent months praying that the schools would choose you. This spring, many of you had a choice to make: where will you go to school? Or perhaps more importantly: will you attend the school with the right color blue?

My guess is, for you graduates, where you will attend college may be the biggest decision you have made in life to date. But the adults sitting around you this morning can affirm that the choices don’t end there. The choices we face *change* over time but we continue to wrestle with decisions—from what we do to whom we share our life with; from how we vote to where we devote our resources; from how we spend our time to whom (or what) we worship. Life is full of choices, and our choices communicate something about what is important to us. From the mundane to the deeply personal to the decisions of life and death, we are constantly facing choices that help determine the course of our lives—what is meaningful, what is good, what is true.

Choice can be good. With it comes the recognition that we are free—free to be here this morning or not, free to attend school or not, free to worship God or not, free to choose. The gift of Christian freedom means that we are both freely addressed by God and free to respond to God.

But that freedom and choice bears a darker side as well. With it comes the recognition that we can and often choose poorly, that our hearts turn from God, that we are tempted by all kinds of idolatry—from the lure of wealth to the misled belief that we can buy happiness, from the conviction that the market or the government can solve all our problems to the misled belief that we can or should wield power over others. Our choices about time, money, and power bring these idols to light.

But I fear that our idolatry extends even deeper, for it has become our common practice to demand choice in all things and, while we want to *have* choices, we do not always want to *make* choices, so we avoid choosing and instead want or try to have it all. We fear missing out on something so we eat,

drive, and text all at the same time. We sit in one room attempting to listen while checking our phone under the table to make sure we're not missing out on anything somewhere else. Perhaps our modern day idol has become choice itself. We make a god out of the ability to choose, often more concerned that we have a choice than what the choice actually is.

And so Elijah speaks a prophetic word to us today when he asks, "How long will you keep limping with two different opinions?" The Hebrew literally says, how long will you keep skipping between two different Gods? If YHWH is the Lord, then follow him. If Ba'al, follow him. Elijah is, in short saying, "Make up your mind. You can't have your cake and eat it too." Elijah challenges the people, as Joshua and others had done before him, "choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15)

On the one hand, this should be an easy choice. The Israelites know the Lord's commandments. They know the law brought by Moses: "I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Exodus 20:2-4). The Lord has made a covenant promise to God's people and desires only that they love him in return.

On the other hand, this isn't an easy choice at all. They find themselves in a time of deep drought. They are thirsty and desperate, far from the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. God feels far off and they have lived under a series of kings who, scripture tells us, have "done what was evil in the sight of the Lord and caused Israel to sin." The kings have sought power and the people have worshipped idols, which surely left them wondering if the Lord had simply given up on them or was preparing a round of punishment for their poor choices. To choose the Lord means standing up against King Ahab who could take their very life for disobedience. In fact, this was not an easy choice at all.

Perhaps we can relate: we want to choose our relationship with God, but time is limited and we live under the myth of "busy-ness." Maybe your own heart feels spiritually dry; you keep coming to worship hoping to encounter the Lord but you're hanging onto the pride that you've got a job and are self-sufficient. You want to know God but you don't think you really *need* the gospel. While your life is unlikely threatened by an evil king, you recognize that being a Christian in the world today makes you just a little bit weird. Many of you have heard the statistics from the Pew Research Forum: for the

first time in American history, more than ¼ of individuals under 30 identify with no particular religion, Christianity or otherwise. For those of you preparing for college, you may find that your roommate doesn't go to church and thinks it's kind of strange if you do. So while the answer to Elijah's question should be easy, making a choice then or now is actually quite difficult.

Elijah poses this question, "How long will you go about limping with two different opinions?" And the scripture tells us, "The people did not answer him a word." The scriptures do not say that they rejected God and chose Ba'al; it says literally they didn't want to make a choice. They were paralyzed and silent.

Elijah steps up and proposes a contest—a battle of the gods. <sup>22</sup>Then Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred and fifty. <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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."

By all accounts, Elijah seems crazy. He's outnumbered 450 to 1. God's chosen people are indecisive at best, and standing up to the king almost certainly endangers his life. But Elijah knows that there is yet another actor in this story who has a choice to make.

The worshippers of Ba'al go first, building an altar, crying out and pleading for fire to come down, and to no avail. Next Elijah steps forward. "Come closer to me," he says. They watched closely as he builds an altar—stone by stone, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, conjuring up memory of God's chosen people. He methodically builds a trench and places the wood and the burnt offering upon it, as their ancestors had done before them. He invites the people to participate by pouring water.

With each of these acts, Elijah has helped the people who have flitted about to and fro for so long to once again be in a place where they can once again witness and experience the presence of the one true God. A stage has been set; now it is God's choice to show up.

Elijah draws near to the altar and prays,

“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 these things at your bidding. Hear me, O God, hear me so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God and you have turned their hearts back.”

Elijah knows that God is free to reveal or conceal Godself, but God has chosen and remained true to God’s people despite all their missteps in the past. He trusts that God’s steadfast faithfulness to his people is much stronger than our own. Elijah’s prayer recalls the altar Abram built when God promised to make Abram’s offspring as bountiful as the stars. His prayer recalls the wooden altar where Isaac was bound when God provided a ram in the thicket, ensuring a continuation of the promise. His prayer recalls the altar Jacob built at Bethel when God renames him Israel and again renewed the covenant for generations to come.

The God who appeared in a smoking firepot for Abraham, a burning bush for Moses, a pillar of fire for the Israelites in the wilderness, once again burns with love for God’s people. God has made his choice; over and over again he makes his choice clear. Despite our bad decisions, despite the evil we have done, despite our idol worship, despite our failure to choose, God’s commitment to the covenant is steadfast and true.

For those of you graduating, Elijah is inviting you this morning to “come a little closer,” to sit beside him at the altar and witness a God who chooses you, who literally burns with love for you. Just as Elijah’s prayer recalled the history of God’s promise through Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the fire recalled God’s presence at critical junctures throughout the journey, I invite you to recall this morning your own history of God’s promise in your life. In your baptism, God’s family—for most of you this particular family—witnessed and affirmed God’s claim on your life. God chose you and called you beloved. God sent his Son to show you the fullest testament of his love and Christ promised at his resurrection, “Lo, I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” In your baptism, you were marked as a child of God and claimed as Christ’s own forever. And so you are invited respond to that good news by loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul and living as if the gospel is true for you.

Last fall, the Presbyterian campus ministry gathered together for Sunday evening worship. It was early in the year and many of the freshmen didn't know each other well. Hearing an account of God's promise in scripture, we like Abraham and Elijah built an altar. We didn't have stones so we used the ordinary things we had—backpacks, flip flops, organic chemistry textbooks. We placed on the altar prayers, recalling the communities we had left behind and the one that God was forming there. And around it we lit candles and like Elijah we prayed. For many, who in the midst of transition felt alone in a new place where friendships were uncertain and God was far off, they were invited that night to “come a little closer” and to recall and experience the Lord that burns with love for them. They had taken a risk that night. They had chosen to come to worship over the 14 other activities that were available, they risked the ridicule of roommates and set aside the pressing homework to choose their relationship with God. And I believe that night they experienced a glimpse of the holy.

Elijah asks us once again, “How long will you keep limping about with two different opinions?” Is God's promise worthy of placing your full devotion and attention? When the choice feels difficult and God seems far off, will you seek out this community—or a college community—that will help you experience God's promise and steadfast love?

As we journey out from this place—whether headed to college or work or back to the daily grind—we reenter the world full of abundant choices, set free to choose a God who chooses us. “How long will you keep limping about with two different opinions?” God freely chooses you. What will you choose?

*The Rev. Katie Owen is the Presbyterian campus minister at Duke University. Katie was born and raised in Topeka, KS. She graduated from Duke University in 2006 as a Public Policy major and Religion minor. During her undergraduate days, she was a Presbyterian Campus Ministry “regular” and found a spiritual home to talk about her faith, her questions, and her convictions. She completed seminary at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA.*