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in the Season after Pentecost

### Jesus Defeats the Forces of Evil

We Christians live in a world that is infiltrated with evil and our vile society assaults the good of God and the love of Christ every day in every way. On our own we cannot gain a victory over evil; in fact, we cannot defend ourselves against evil. Only Jesus has the power to overcome Satan and the evil he spawns. He defends us with his power, provides weapons for battle, and promises that we will gain the victory.

#### Sermon

1 Kings 18:19-39

**Elijah said to King Ahab, “Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”**

**So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.**

**Then Elijah said to them, “Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for them and I will prepare the other bull. 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—he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”**

**Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears until their blood flowed. But there was no response.**

**Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob and he built an altar in the name of the Lord and he dug a trench around it. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces, and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.” “Do it again,” he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.**

**At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”**

Back in 1989 and 1990, the committee that prepared *Christian Worship* was at work selecting the hymns that would go into the new hymnal. I don’t remember a lot from 30 years ago, but I remember that there was a question about keeping the soldier hymns in the new hymnal, hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Fight the Good Fight.” Some

members wondered if Lutherans in WELS would want to sing those old soldier hymns anymore. Vietnam was 15 years behind us; that war was over. The Berlin wall came down in 1989, so even the Cold War was past. At that point nobody could anticipate the wars with Iraq and Afghanistan. So the question was probably legitimate back then: Why should we keep the soldier hymns in the new book if WELS Lutherans won't want to sing them?

I don't remember how long the discussion lasted; probably not too long. "Onward Christian Soldiers" and "Fight the Good Fight" are in this book just like they're in the new book. I doubt there was ever a chance that they wouldn't be. But that discussion from 30 years ago raises a question. How do we WELS Lutherans deal with the reality that we are involved in war every day? From the day that demonic angel named Satan rebelled against God to this very moment when I'm standing in this pulpit and you're sitting in those pews, the armies of hell have never stopped attacking the followers of God. And from this moment to the last moment before Christ returns, they will not stop attacking the followers of God. That means we have to fight. Being a soldier is hard; it's demeaning and degrading and dangerous. Being at war is worse; it takes steadfastness and strategy and sacrifice. In many ways those are the realities we face as we battle with the devil. It's no fun. And some Christians don't want to talk about war and certainly don't want to sing about it.

Jesus faced the battle with Satan straight on. He never flinched; he never turned around and ran. We heard about Jesus in the Gospel for today (Mark 9:14-27), the devil appeared in the form of a spirit who had been tormenting an innocent boy for years. Jesus took the spirit on and destroyed it. Elijah did the same. Satan appeared to Elijah in an evil king and queen, a battalion of fanatical priests, and the waffling nation of Israel. Elijah didn't flinch, either. In fact, he laughed and taunted and he put them all to shame.

Whether we realize it or not and whether we like it or not, you and I are involved in the same conflict. Our battles are different from the one Jesus fought and the one Elijah fought, but it's the same war. This war is scary and it's hard, but we can't turn and run and we can't surrender. So here's what we need to do: We need to

### **Stand with Christ in the Clash of the Ages**

Nothing was going good for the nation of Israel. The northern half of David's original kingdom broke away and lost their interest in the temple in Jerusalem. One king after another led them farther and farther away from the true God. Ahab was the worst by a long shot. He set up the idol Baal as the official god of Israel and made his wife Jezebel the official priestess. Jezebel and her priests set up practices that I don't even want to describe in front of nice people. God had enough. He sent a drought that devastated the land; the people of Israel were suffering physically as well as spiritually. It was time for a confrontation. The place was Mt. Carmel. Ahab and Jezebel came, the priests of Baal came, and the people of Israel came. Elijah was there, too—He came alone.

Elijah laid it out and he was perfectly clear: **How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.** These people knew what was at stake. They remembered what Moses had said to God's people years before: **See, I set before you today life and prosperity and death and destruction. If you love the LORD your God and keep his commands, you will live. But if your heart turns away and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you that you will certainly be destroyed.** This was the turning point for them. They would have to come clean: the true God or the idol Baal.

The true God or the demon Satan. Like I said: Different battle; same war. Do you ever sense that way too often we fail to take Satan's attacks seriously? It's so much easier just to give in and not worry about it. Doze off during the sermon, ignore the study of the scriptures, skimp on our offerings? Tell a dirty joke, share some delicious gossip, click on a porn site? The list could get longer, but we all get the picture. The battle with Satan never starts with a nuclear attack; it starts with a BB gun. A BB pellet can't kill you but you can't ignore the sting. Every attack of the devil means to destroy our relationship with God. We need to come to grips with what's at stake here. It's a matter of life or death.

So Elijah set up the battle plan: Two bulls, one for the priests of Baal, another for Elijah, both cut into pieces and laid on two altars. **You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God.** OK.

You understand the odds here, right? There are 450 priests of Baal and 400 priests of Asherah—950 passionate priests against one prophet. They gave it their all. **They shouted and they danced.** Elijah taunted them and teased them and they just shouted louder. **They slashed themselves with swords and spears until their blood flowed** and they continued their frantic screaming for hours.

You get the feeling Elijah was intimidated or scared? Doesn't seem so, does it. He just laughed. But look. It's not so easy to laugh when Satan attacks. At least it isn't for me and I'm guessing you feel the same. Think of that boy in the Gospel for today. The demon robbed him of his speech, threw him to the ground, made him foam at the mouth, grind his teeth, and suffer convulsions. I bet he wasn't laughing; his dad certainly wasn't. Satan's attacks come in so many different ways. The pain never stops; you feel it every time you move. The ache in your heart doesn't go away even though what makes you ache happened years ago. And then there's the reality that Satan repeats the same temptation again and again and you feel yourself just wearing down. And who are we, we little band of Lutherans, to defend the Bible when our government and our churches and even our neighbors defend and protect sins like abortion and gay marriage? So many of them and so few of us. So much power there and so little strength here. This is not funny; there's no humor here. It all makes us want to cry and maybe even give up.

An altar with 12 stones, one for each of the tribes of God's chosen people. A deep trench around the altar. 12 large jars of water which ran down the sides of the altar and filled the trench. A bleeding bull. And then a prayer: **Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.** Elijah wasn't laughing now. He was dead serious. He was taking on the forces of Satan in all their fury. Was there a pause? Was there a moment of silence? We don't know. But all at once **the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.** The Baal bull was still there, lying on its altar, smelling like a slaughtered bull smells after hours in the hot sun. But not God's bull. God exterminated his bull. Baal's priests were still there, too, hoarse, bleeding, and humiliated. And Elijah was there, standing tall and alone, the Lord's own prophet. **When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!"**

No altar, no bull, no water, no fire, no prophet of God. Only the voice of Jesus, the Son of God. **You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. The spirit shrieked, convulsed the boy violently and came out.** Our Lord Jesus doesn't play games with Satan. Not here in today's Gospel: **Come out of him!** Not in the wilderness when Satan tempted him: **Away from me, Satan!** Not with Peter when the disciple tried to stop Jesus from the cross: **Get behind me Satan!** Not as he endured the punishment for sin: **It is finished!** And not as he lay dead in his tomb: **I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!** In living and dying and rising again, Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil.

Whether we need soldier hymns or not, I don't know. What I do know and what we all know is that we are engaged in the battle of our lives. What is at stake is life with God now and life with God forever. That's what Elijah told the people of Israel. The strife is long and the warfare is fierce. Elijah knew that on Mt. Carmel. But Elijah did not stand alone as he faced the forces of Satan. The Lord was there with his consuming fire. We don't stand alone, either. Jesus is here with us with his consuming love. He forgives our sins every day, even our sins of weakness and fear. He supplies us with weapons every day, the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. And every day, he guarantees us the ultimate victory over Satan and all the forces of evil. What you sing isn't so important; what's important is this, that we **Stand with Christ in the Clash of the Ages.** Amen.