

Doing Your own Thing

We're entering into one of the most interesting periods in Israel's history, the time of the Judges. Joshua has led the Hebrew people into the land God had promised them. A good number of their enemies have been driven from the land, but many others remain. The worship of Yahweh is established, but it is surrounded by the worship of Baal and other strange deities, a worship that is very different from that practiced by Israel. The people are settled in their tribal areas, with some of the land being occupied by the tribes of Israel and some being occupied by Hittites and Amorites and Canaanites, etc. The people are exhausted from years of fighting and they are ready to settle down, even though they are surrounded by idol-worshipers, and those people and their idols would become a snare to them.

Here's the historical scene as described in chapter 2:

After Joshua sent the people away, each of the tribes left to take possession of the land allotted to them. And the Israelites served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the leaders who outlived him - those who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. Then Joshua son of Nun, the servant of Yahweh, died at the age of 110. They buried him in the land he had inherited, at Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the LORD or remember the mighty things He had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did what was evil in the LORD's sight and worshiped the images of Baal. They abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They chased after other gods, worshiping the gods of the people around them. And they angered Yahweh. They abandoned the LORD to serve Baal and the images of Ashtoreth. This made Yahweh burn with anger against Israel, so that He handed them over to marauders... (2:6-14)

Do you see why God kept telling His people "remember, remember, remember ... teach your children and your grandchildren ... tell them the great things your God has done for you." Now, here they were, settled in the land that Abraham had lived in hundreds of years earlier, but they had forgotten the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and they became enamored with the gods of the nations they had just defeated in battle.

What were these gods like and what was their appeal to the Israelites? Like many other primitive religions, Baal-worship was focused on the fertility of the land, of the livestock and of the people. Canaan has been described as "an arid and agriculturally marginal area of the world". It depends on the rain coming in the rainy season, and coming in sufficient quantity to replenish the lakes and rivers and the aquifers of Palestine. If it doesn't come, disaster awaits, in the form of drought and famine.

Ba'al was seen as the "storm god", the one who brought the rain, and therefore fertility, to the land. If you want to understand these forces in depth, read the

Babylonian creation story, the Enuma Elish, in which the idea is presented that the world was created and is sustained in a constant battle between order and chaos. To know how Ba'al became the chief of the gods, you would need to read the Ugaritic texts which describe his alliances, his battles with other gods, his defeat at the hands of Mot, the god of death and the underworld, and his rescue by Anat and Shapash, the sun god, who rescued him and restored him to his position. His time in the underworld is a clear picture of what happens when the rains don't fall, when drought comes instead of fruitfulness, when there is no harvest and no hope.

When Israel entered the Promised Land, they didn't abandon Yahweh, but they did embrace Ba'al. In their minds, Yahweh was the God of power and mighty acts of deliverance. He was the God who parted the sea and then the Jordan River. He was the God who provided manna in the desert and water from the rock. Ba'al was the god who took care of weather patterns and who caused the flocks to breed and have healthy offspring and who did the same for humans. This blending of two religious belief systems is called syncretism and it became a pattern in Israel for centuries -- not always, but often.

Ba'al worship involved the performance of rituals, including what was called "sacred prostitution". When you read about the people of Israel going up to the "high places" or worshiping Ba'al "under every spreading tree", you are reading about cult prostitution, which is, put bluntly, trying to get Ba'al stirred up enough to cause the rains to fall so that the crops would be watered ... or to cause the cattle or sheep or goats to get aroused and to mate or to cause a couple to become pregnant. That was his department, at least, that's how it came to be seen in Israel.

That's why the encounter between Elijah and Ahab and, ultimately, the prophets of Ba'al was so significant. In 1 Kings 17, we read:

Now Elijah ... told King Ahab, "As surely as Yahweh, the God of Israel lives ... there will be no dew or rain during the next few years unless I give the word."

It wasn't until the third year of drought that the LORD told Elijah to go and present himself to King Ahab and then to challenge the prophets of Ba'al to the famous duel on Mt. Carmel in which Yahweh demonstrated without a doubt that He was the God of rain, He was the provider for His people ... not Ba'al, who was shown to be impotent.

Back to the book of Judges and the passage we just read. Chapter 2, v. 13: "They abandoned Yahweh to serve Baal and the images of Ashtoreth." That's where it begins. That's where the Israelites began to add in to their religious life the worship of the gods of the Canaanites. Ashtoreth, or Asherah, was the female consort, the fertility goddess, the partner of Ba'al.

So the unfaithfulness of Israel began a generation after they settled into the land God had given them. And the book of Judges tells us where their unfaithfulness led them -- always, again and again, it led to disaster, to ruin, at the hands of one enemy after another, starting in ch. 3:

The Israelites did what was evil in Yahweh's sight. They forgot about the LORD

their God, and they worshiped the images of Baal and the Asherah poles. Then Yahweh burned with anger against Israel, and He handed them over to King Cushan-rishathaim or Aram-naharaim. And the Israelites were subject to him for eight years. But when Israel cried out to the LORD for help, the LORD raised up a man to rescue them. His name was Othniel, the son of Caleb's younger brother, Kenaz. The Spirit of Yahweh came upon him, and he became Israel's judge. He went to war against King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram, and Yahweh gave Othniel victory over him. So there was peace in the land for forty years. Then Othniel, son of Kenaz, died. (3:7-11)

This story is repeated over and over again. The common elements are:

1. The Israelites did evil -- that's probably code language for, "they went back to worshiping Ba'al and Asherah"
2. They suffered for it, as they were defenseless against the armies of their enemies, unless God helped them.
3. They suffered for a long time. They didn't look up and say, "Here come the Moabites, we'd better get right with Yahweh." Instead, we read, "the Israelites were subject to Moab for eighteen years." (3:14)
4. Finally they cried out to Yahweh for help.
5. Yahweh would anoint or inspire a judge to take up the interests of His people.
6. Yahweh would work deliverance through His appointed judge
7. The land would be at peace throughout the lifetime of the individual whom God had anointed.

There are some famous judges, whose stories we are told in great detail: Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson, and there are others who we only know by name. Towards the end of the book, the stories seem to become more and more gruesome, with hopeless perversion and evil. In these final chapters there is a phrase that is repeated four times; in 17:6, 18:1, 19:1 and 21:25:

"In those days, Israel had no king"

In two of those passages, the first time it appears and again at the very end of the book of Judges, an additional phrase is added:

"So the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." (21:25)

When I look at the time of the Judges of Israel and try to understand what was going on, I find some interesting parallels to our day. What I see is people trying to make their own religion, trying to put things together in such a way that all the bases are covered. They have the God who delivered them from Egypt and they come into a land where people worship a fertility God, the one who supposedly sends rain. They think, "Isn't it better to hedge our bets, to have both gods, rather than just one?" And so they bring into their world view, their religious life, the belief in and the practices of, the pagan gods of the Canaanites.

What happens when you adopt a buffet approach to your faith life? You grab your plate, walk down both sides of the long table and pick out whatever appeals to you. So, Israel would grab hold of faith in Yahweh to deliver them from oppressive

enemies and they took to the hills to try to please the god they thought would bring them the seasonal rains, and later some would offer their firstborn children to the god Moloch in order to either appease his anger or to gain some advantage, like rain. The gods of other nations came to be accepted -- King Solomon built places of worship for a number of his foreign wives who came from Egypt (daughter of Pharaoh), from Moab, from Ammon, from Edom, from Sidon and from the Hittites. 1 Kings 11:4 tells us, "In Solomon's old age, they (his 700 wives and 300 concubines) turned his heart to worship their gods instead of trusting only in Yahweh his God, as his father, David, had done."

At the religious buffet you find yourself facing other choices. There's the choice of what religious ceremonies you will find important and which ones you will ignore. You can't do everything, so will you go to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts or will you go to some festival for Ba'al?

And then there's the choice of what ethical behavior to adopt. "Should we follow the commands of Yahweh," the Israelites might have asked, "or should we do the things that our neighbours find acceptable?" Obviously, they rejected large chunks of the commandments that the LORD God had given them and chose to do many things that angered Him, including having sex with Ba'al's male and female prostitutes, including offering their first-born in the fire of Moloch, something that Yahweh later said was a thing He hadn't commanded, nor would it ever have entered His mind -- it was so evil.

And in the time of the Judges the buffet table took the place of the law of Yahweh. "In those days Israel had no king, so the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes."

In our country, the Christians have been around for a very long time. While the desire for religious liberty was more important to those who settled parts of the east coast of the U.S., the religious climate of the 17th and 18th and early 19th centuries was such that many of those who came to Canada brought with them conservative Christian beliefs and practices. Others brought with them a desire to make a lot of money in the fur trade or in some other scheme, but many came to settle in a new land, a land of opportunity and challenges that were different from those back home.

There were Roman Catholics and Protestants, and within the Protestants a great variety of beliefs, but they were Christians. So, when one of our Father's of Confederation, Samuel Leonard Tilley, suggested that Canada be called the Dominion of Canada from his reading of Psalm 72:8 in his devotions that morning, "He shall have dominion from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth", it was adopted.

I don't know if it's a fair comparison in every way, but Canada was a bit like Israel in the wilderness. The laws of the land were broadly based on Scriptural teaching, there were churches in nearly every community, there was a broad sense that there was a common morality that every-one accepted, whether they lived under it or not. For example, divorce was quite rare, abortion more so, and people often didn't lock their

doors at night because they had no fear of the other people in their community.

And then, beginning with the end of World War II and picking up steam in the 1960's, we came under the onslaught of Cultural Marxism, which I've talked about before. We found ourselves sharing the cultural mantle with something called multiculturalism which is not really the acceptance of cultural differences as it is a statement that we don't have a culture of our own, at least not one we're proud of and want to keep. And that was probably true, at the time -- at least among those who were ruling the country. It was certainly true of Pierre Trudeau who put into law what the academic world was putting into the minds of its students.

So now, we're sharing the promised land with lots of different cultures and religions and we are, daily, at the buffet table. It would be so easy to pick up a little bit of this and a little bit of that, to adopt the world's views on morality, on everyone finding their own meaning in life, on a whole host of options on what is good or right and what is evil or wrong. The world is full of sales people who can convince us of the value or merit of almost anything.

What do we do? Do we stand at the buffet, looking at all the options and wondering if we're missing out on some real good ones, or do we really believe, and will really act on, the idea that God can supply all our needs, that He is the One who has our best interests at heart and that we'll be better off by pushing away from the buffet and deciding to follow Jesus, being His disciples, going where He leads us? Israel's view of God determined the outcome; they believed they needed more, while God had promised that He was all they would need. What's our view?

You know I'm going to say that God is trustworthy and that we should walk away from the buffet of religious beliefs and moral practices, but why and how?

The why is the easier question to answer. Look at one specific measurement of the social breakdown over the past 50 years in our culture -- the discipline problems teachers faced in their public school classrooms. Here are the top seven from the two decades after World War II:

1. children talking 2. children chewing gum 3. children making noise 4. children running in the halls 5. getting out of turn in line 6. dress code infractions, and 7. not putting paper in the waste paper basket

The same surveys were done 40 some years later and the top seven problems that teachers faced were:

1. drug abuse 2. alcohol abuse 3. pregnancy 4. suicide 5. rape 6. robbery
7. assault. Chewing gum didn't even get on the list.

In 1966 or 67 church attendance peaked in Canada and it's been in decline ever since. B.C. has a higher percentage of people who mark their census "no religion" than any other part of Canada, including Quebec. The world around us would like to pretend that there is another answer to the problems we're experiencing in our society, that if we all wear pink t-shirts that people will start to care for one another, that if we can just get our public school teachers to parent 25 kids per hour that we

can improve. What is really happening is that we are becoming technologically more advanced, and rapidly so, but our souls are dying.

Our world has, mostly, rejected the teachings of Scripture because they restrict people's freedom, and that freedom is destroying their lives. They don't know what to do with it, what's good, what's worth investing time in, what will build their character. They only know what they like, what they want to indulge in, whether video games or sex without commitment or guilt. This vast freedom to do whatever you want, to belly up to the buffet and grab everything that appeals to you, is the freedom that Israel had when they decided to add in the religious practices of the Canaanites to their worship of Yahweh. It's a moral emptiness, a world without values and therefore with greatly diminished value, a world that promises much more than it delivers.

What can we do? We can meet together and talk about the values we hold as Christians. We can encourage each other to pursue the values of the cross and the kingdom that's coming. We can live uniquely, prophetically, in front of a world that has no idea what it is all about. Because the darkness around us is growing, and is doing so at a dramatic rate, I think the time to do this is now. If we can't keep the light on in our souls and in the souls of people we love and with whom we worship the living God, the light will go out, and then what hope will there be for Canada?

Don't expect politicians to solve these kinds of problems. By the nature of their job, they will always be much better at creating the problems than solving them. The answers to the crisis in our culture will be found in the carpenter of Nazareth, not in the false hopes of those who desire power.

But what we can do is to build one another up, to encourage faith and obedience. Paul wrote these words to Timothy and I'll end with this:

I know that you sincerely trust the Lord ... This is why I remind you to fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you ... For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love and self-discipline. (2 Tim. 1:5-7)

Fan into flame what God has birthed in you, and be a person who ignites the fire of true faith in others as you love people, as you pray together, as you encourage the sparks of insight and obedience wherever you see them.