So let’s recap from where we’ve been this autumn season at Friendship. In September we returned to the beginning of God’s Word, to Genesis, Creation, the flood, the call of Abraham, stories of Moses and Joshua, then Ruth, her great grandson David, his grandson Rehaboam and the Kingdom of Israel, that David had labored so hard to unite, was divided again. We read that story on All Saint’s Sunday a week ago.

Today we are in First Kings, where there are TWO Kingdoms: Smaller, holier Judah to the south, with its capital Jerusalem, and larger, worldlier Israel to the north, with Samaria it’s capital city. That’s right, Samaria was once a royal city, filled with children of Israel. Back in those days, being a Samaritan was a good thing!

In Jesus’ day, Samaria was a region north of Jerusalem, full of icky people no one talks to, except of course, Jesus, who’ll make friends with anybody! And of course, being Christians, we hear a lot of stories about Jesus. We DON’T hear many stories of the Golden Age of Israel, when Samaria was the Big Town, and Jerusalem was the one horse trailer park full of hillbillies.

This Golden Age, like all golden ages, did not last long. But while it did, the king, Omri, was able to convince the king of Sidon, an even bigger, shinier town, to give his daughter in marriage to Omri’s son. So, when Omri died, Ahab became king, with his queen Jezebel.

I’m sure she was a nice princess but she did not know the Lord, the God of Israel, and she worshipped instead Ba-al, which was a popular option back then. And here’s the thing, if you were royalty, you at least got to make a choice. Back in that day, what the king believed, his people believed, end of story. Ordinary people were not given the choice. There was NO freedom or Religion. There was precious little freedom at all! That’s just the way it was. What the king believes, YOU believe.

So King Ahab leads his kingdom Israel, the legacy of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, into worship of other gods. And then God objected to Ahab’s decision, and sent his prophet to Israel.

Elisha the Tishbite, from, well, Tishbe, a small town across the Jordan River, jumps up and says, “As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word!”

Wells dry up, rivers dry up, lakes dry up, everything dies. There’s no food, everybody suffers. Even the king and queen in their palace suffer. Unhappy people start thinking a new king and queen might do better appeasing the rain gods. So no one is happy.

Elijah sends word to the king in the THIRD year of the draught. Everyone including the king is desperate. When Ahab sees Elijah, he says, “Is that YOU, Troubler of Israel?” – see, politicians were blaming others for their problems even back in the old days. Good to see some things never change. Elijah gives as good as he gets:

“I have not troubled Israel, but YOU have, You and your Father’s House, because you have forsakent the commandments of the Lord and followed the baals. Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at mount carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

Eight hundred and fifty prophets of pagan gods supported by the queen of Israel. Wow, that’s a burden during a drought, don’t you think? How do you feed that many people, when there’s no water to grow food? Well, I can’t imagine that kind of spending being looked at favorably by the people of Israel, no matter which god they worshipped. Maybe even Ahab was getting tired of hundreds of foreign holy rollers sitting at his table and eating his bread every night! So he listens to Elijah and sends for a huge national gathering at Mount Carmel, to the north.

Elijah then challenges the people of Israel, as we read earlier. How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord, Yahweh is God, follow him! But if baal, follow him!”

Read 1 Kings 18 25-39

“The Lord indeed is God. Yahweh indeed is God!” So they all shout. Elijah saunters up to King Ahab, smiles, and says, “Get ready, it’s gonna really rain here soon!”

And that’s more or less it. God wins, greedy foreign prophets lose.

Now, here’s a number of lessons we can draw from this story.

1. Don’t worship other gods. That’s pretty clear.
2. Yahweh, the LORD, is God alone.
3. Elijah, the desert prophet, living in the desert, is easier to provide for than eight hundred prophets of Baal.
4. God does miracles for those who believe.

All those are good lessons, good morals. But is that what the Spirit is saying to the churches? I suppose there are many false gods out there, many false prophets eating at the kings’ table, while the people languish. But why this story? We know the bible is inspired by God, but we also know human hands wrote it, human minds decided to write, to copy, to edit, to retell the story. But what did this particular story mean to them?

It seems up until now, prophets spoke with kings. Samuel spoke with King Saul. Nathan talked to King David. Isaiah and Jeremiah advised kings in Jerusalem. Ezekiel would have, had he not been dragged into exile. Even Elijah and then Elisha after him, in the chapters following this one, they advised King Ahab as he tried to turn things around in Israel.

Rarely, if ever, does the prophet speak to all the people. But consider. Elijah could say, “The Lord indeed is God. Yahweh indeed is God!” all day long. He could shout it from the housetops, but if the king didn’t listen, NOBODY listened. The king decides, the people follow. That’s how it is.

So when in this story, the PEOPLE cry out, “The Lord indeed is God! Yahweh indeed is God!” Then something new is happening. It’s not the prophet the king has to worry about, it’s his own people! Who are they to decide who is ‘indeed God’ after all? Well, on this day, at this moment in bible history, the PEOPLE tell the KING who they will worship!

And then the king LISTENS! That is revolutionary! That is a whole new thing! It’s not for the king to choose! It’s the people’s choice!

Now this is good news for the people – to have choice is to have some measure of freedom. And freedom is always better than slavery! And it’s good news for King Ahab, too, because at least now he doesn’t have to feed those eight hundred freeloaders at his table every night. As for his wife, “Sorry, honey, the people have spoken!” Yeah, that’s a fight Ahab is going to have for a while with Jezebel, but that’s his problem. The people are free again to worship the God of their ancestors, the God of Israel.

We live in a world where we can worship whatever god we choose.

Dr Martin Luther said once, ‘Whatever you fear, love and trust: That is your God.’ That applies to atheists as well as idolators. There are things in our lives in which we ALL place too much fear, love, and trust. Things that absorb our time and talents to no good end, that suck us dry, bring drought into our lives. Things that bear no good fruit. These are gods. Idols. False divinities that promise health, wealth, romance and luck; but deliver nothing but vanity. Some take the form of just simple bad habits. Some take the demonic form of addictions and dependency. They take the life of our children, the treasure of our land. I know addiction can be treated as a disease, and I hope for a cure as well, but every addiction begins with a decision. One bad choice. Idolatry!

So the Bad News is this: You are free to choose. You have that power. Your have consequences. The God who loves you will not shield you from the results of evil choices, you are free. That is the burden of liberty, and it is inescapable.

But the Good News is this: You are free to choose. The God who loves you will NEVER turn his back on you, even as God did NOT turn his back on Israel, when you go astray God is right there, ready to forgive, to set you back on the path. Our God of Second Chances. God of Israel!

So choose this day whom you will serve. Choose life, that you and your children after you will prosper in the good land the Lord your God is giving you. Choose life, so the dryness of your heart might be transformed by the soaking rain of new life. So as in the days of Elijah, you may turn to the Lord and be restored. For the Days are fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, so repent and believe the Good News.