

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 96

1 Kings 18:20-39

## THE COMPETITION

What does this tune remind you of? Nah, nah, nah-nah-nah, nah, nah. It's a taunting tune, a sneering song, isn't it? Did something like that ever escape from your mouth, maybe when you were just six or seven years old? The purpose seemingly is to mock someone, to make them feel small, so you might feel a bit bigger yourself. That's the tune that came to my mind when I read about Elijah's actions in our text from First Kings. And the words that went with that tune in my head were: "My God's bigger than your god!" Perhaps this is not the scripture passage to offer you and me guidance about interfaith relations in today's world.

What do we do with such a story as part of our scripture? It is an interesting tale. It has all kinds of drama going on. Elijah, as one person, in essence challenges King Ahab along with 450 prophets of Baal to a duel. One against 451 - you thought the contest between young David and the giant Goliath was a mismatch! The story of the great contest actually starts prior to our reading when Ahab's father who was king of Israel struck a deal with the king of Phoenicia that his daughter, Jezebel, would marry Ahab. When Ahab then becomes king, Jezebel becomes queen, and she brings her Phoenician idols, including Baal, with her. Soon thereafter, Ahab sets up a temple to Baal in Samaria. Now Baal was understood to be a god who had control over storms and fertility. So Elijah, a prophet of the God who had established the people of Israel declares to Ahab that there is going to be a drought and Baal won't be able to bring a storm to break it. It is in the third year of this drought that Ahab sees the one who he characterizes as a troublemaker, Elijah. The prophet asks for an epic showdown to take place at Mount Carmel, the bastion of Baal worship. All the prophets of Baal are to prepare a sacrifice of a bull and he, Elijah, would prepare a separate animal sacrifice. Whichever god would send down fire to burn the sacrifice would be the one who demonstrates the power to rule over and protect Israel and would win the day as the one the people should be worshipping. If reality TV had been around back then, the showdown at Mount Carmel would have been a ratings bonanza for ultimate reality TV. Perhaps this is not the scripture passage to offer you and me guidance today about putting God to the test.

Elijah was concerned about the loyalties of the people. He challenged the crowd who gathered for the contest, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." They did not answer, because they worshiped the Lord on the Sabbath, but during the week they hedged their bets and paid homage to Baal just in case that way would offer some benefits. Elijah wanted to show that this idol whose portfolio of powers included storm-making ought to be able to muster up a lightning strike to burn up the sacrificial offering. Once the prophets of Baal had done all they could in prayer asking that Baal send a bolt of lightning without getting a response, Elijah goes into his ridicule of their religious practices. His "My God's bigger than your god," was intended to get the people of Israel to remember the God who had answered their prayers all along the way, the one who had brought the twelve tribes of Israel through the wilderness and into the promised land. So Elijah used twelve large stones for his altar and twelve large jars of water dumped on everything just to make it clear that when the fire came it wasn't just from static electricity. "I want you to know who is going to win the day. Remember who you are, whose you are, people of Israel," he was saying! And then when Elijah prays that the Lord show who is the real God, a consuming fire comes and burns up everything, including the ditch filled with water around the altar. Is this the scripture passage to which we refer when we are having trouble starting a bonfire?

What does this ancient story have for you and me? There is a competition going on in it, but not one that in our world calls for a public contest between the powers of the God of Christianity and the God of other religions. Neither is it about appropriate pyrotechnic methodology for those who want to figure out a provocative way to proclaim the God who reigns over all. Rather, it speaks to a competition on the Mount Carmel that is in our hearts.

There is a competition going on within us between what we affirm here at church and what we do during the week. We do not generally construct gods of wood and stone, but we do long for something physical, something we can see in which to place our trust. We may want to place all of our trust in science, that which is measurable and observable. The world of science has brought us great understanding and benefits, but it can't measure certain things. Science seeks to understand creation, but there is a Creator who is beyond creation with whom we can relate. We may long to know, to be sure about things, but we are called to a life of faith which embraces that which we cannot see, the ultimate mystery of hope, love, and purpose. There is this competition within us - we learn from the bible about a God who sets an example of sacrificial giving, but we also would like to have a god who would feed our greed. We at times elevate our own pleasure and comfort and desire for entertainment to what we ultimately are pursuing. How much room for generosity is left in our hearts when we sense that our security is really in our monetary investments? Are we more concerned about our social standing than we are about loving those people we might be criticized for loving? Do we give of our time and energy for those who most need it, or only for those who potentially could return the favor?

There is a competition going on that doesn't put God to the test, but puts us to the test instead. The contest on Mount Carmel is taking place within you and me, particularly when we walk out of this sanctuary. In whom or in what will we place our greatest trust? Elijah, whose very name means 'My God is the Lord,' is the troublemaker once again who challenges us to look at the competition for the loyalty and trust of our hearts and minds to determine whether our God is going to be bigger than these other gods in our lives. He doesn't want us to be fooling ourselves that we give our full loyalty to God, when that covers only one hour of one day a week. There is a competition for our allegiance. However, when we remember who we are, whose we are, we will find the One who helps us be bigger in spirit and heart and mind than we otherwise would be. We are given the opportunity where not only our mouths, but also our lives will say, "My God is the Lord." If we allow, the One who has been faithful to us will win the day and the night and the forevermore of our purpose and loyalty. Let the competition be over. May our hearts so burn! Amen.