

“Nice”

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St. Paul’s UCC Church

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1 Kings 18:20-39

So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The people did not answer him a word. 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. 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. 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." All the people answered, "Well spoken!" Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it." So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me"; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down; Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name"; with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood." Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time, so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "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 all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are

God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."

I was a kid when I first heard this story – probably just around my son Wil's age. And I *loved* it! How could I not? It was so dramatic, so vivid, so interesting. Perfect for a kid with a wild imagination.

We're in the first book of Kings today, where we hear about King Ahab. Now, to understand this story, you have to understand that King Ahab was a bad king! Very bad. Last week, we heard the story of Ruth and Naomi, which took place during the time of the Judges. But this week, we're in the time of Israel's history when the kings ruled, and scripture likes to divide kings into two distinct categories: "bad" and "good." Ahab is most definitely considered one of the baddies: corrupt, power-hungry, and oh-so-unfaithful! He doesn't even worship the God of Israel, at least not fully. He worships a god called Baal, who is the god supposedly responsible for the weather: droughts, rains, etc.

So Ahab, very bad. It's very bad for a king of Israel to worship a foreign god... which is how Elijah the Prophet appears on the scene.

Elijah the Prophet has been a real thorn in the flesh for Ahab the Bad King. Elijah keeps predicting droughts... and by the time we arrive at today's story from I Kings 18, surprise! Elijah's predictions have come true. The whole land has been in severe drought-mode for three years. And, as you can imagine, the people are anxious, afraid, and very hungry.

Elijah makes his move. He challenges Ahab to a contest: which is more powerful, the God of Israel, or Baal?

Ahab orders all the people and all his prophets to gather at Mount Carmel. Elijah lays out the rules of the game: each side will be given a bull to cut into pieces and lay on the altar. The prophets of Baal are to call on their god, while Elijah will call on the God of Israel. And the one who answers is the true God.

The prophets of Baal are ready. They cut up their bull, crying out to Baal. This lasts for several hours, from morning until noon. Around noon, Elijah, unable to hold back any longer, starts really socking it to 'em: "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; [maybe] he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened!" (I Kings 18:27). By the end of the day, the prophets of Baal are getting so desperate that they start cutting themselves with swords and lances, "until the blood gushed out over them," the author of I Kings writes with flourish, "[and] they raved on... but there was no voice, no answer, and no response" (I Kings 18:29).

Now it's Elijah's turn. He carefully selects twelve stones – representing the twelve tribes of Israel – and places them on the altar. He digs a trench around the stones, puts together the wood, cuts up the bull and lays it down. He then commands, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the offering and the wood." The people obey. But he's not done, "Do it again!," he barks, with a smirk. The people obey, bringing him even more water. But he's *still* not done, "Do it a third time!," he practically sings. The people bring more water.

It's now time to call on Elijah's god – the God of Israel. After Elijah invokes the name and favor of God, you can hear a pin drop...

They don't have to wait long. Suddenly, a whoosh! And the fire of the Lord blazes all around them, burning up the bull, destroying the wood and stone, drying up all the water. The people are no fools. If there was any doubt before, it has all been scorched away by that holy fire: "The Lord indeed is God, the Lord indeed is God!," they cry out, falling on their faces, ready, at long last, to turn back to the one true God of Israel.

So, you can see why I loved this story so much as a kid. You probably did too when you heard it.

But when I hear the story today... I'm not so sure. As I read it *this* time around, I am struck with something that never crossed my mind when I was a child: *Elijah is kind of mean*. Do you sense that at all? Maybe it's just me, but does he have to be such a bully? I get this "na, na, na, na, boo boo!" vibe from him that I find... kind of unsettling. Does he really have to act so pompous? I mean, I know he's right and everything – I appreciate the point he is making – but isn't there a more agreeable, friendlier, more polite way of making it? Would it have hurt Elijah to have acted just a little bit... nicer?

But maybe... maybe the problem's not with Elijah at all. Maybe the problem lies with me.

What is it about Elijah's behavior that I find so distasteful? Well... he's not willing to play well with the other children on the playground. He's not willing to compromise, or to hear another's perspective. He doesn't seem loving, or kind, or open-minded. He's not polite. He's not nice.

And I like so much to be nice.

But maybe that's the problem.

I am so afraid of upsetting or offending anyone that I often resort to just being *nice*. And although I really don't like to admit it, maybe I could learn a thing or two from Elijah. The prophet reminds me that following *this* God – *our* God, the God of Israel – this is a risky business. Our God is not always polite and nice; our God is *impolite* – rude, even. Our God comes as fire from heaven, fire that could consume us. Our God confronts us, challenges us, calls us to embrace *life* in a world devoted to death.

And there's nothing "nice" about that.

Come to think of it, if we fast forward a few thousand years, Jesus wasn't always very nice or polite either. His disciples ate their food with unwashed hands – such manners! – and he defended them (!) when people complained. When Jesus ate, he broke bread with the worst kind of sinners: the unclean, people who weren't even welcome in the Temple. Tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes.

Thousands of years after the prophet Elijah, Jesus wasn't always polite. He wasn't always nice. Jesus was, in fact, kind of rude. He flouted convention, and, time and time again, he risked the wrath of the powers-that-be. And why? Because in Jesus Christ, we meet someone more important than someone who is nice. In Jesus Christ, the reign of God comes near.

So today, I think God is reminding me, and all of us, that some things matter more than being nice. In the reign of God, everyone is welcome... even the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the unclean...even the rejects, the homeless the abused... the addicts, the sick, the broken. Even you. Even me.

And there's nothing "nice" about that.

Thanks be to God.