



WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

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1 Kings 19:1-15a

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

“What are you doing here?” the interim Associate Pastor asked me in the church hallway. It was Sunday evening and I was in 8th grade, too young to be part of the Senior High Youth Group meeting. The question stung enough then that I still remember it now...where each of us stood in that hallway. How he looked...taller than I was, the expression on his face less curious than critical, or so it seemed to me. How I suddenly felt even smaller, which is not the same thing as simply being shorter. Asked to justify my presence and my purpose, his question took me aback. After all, I was at the church all the time: Sunday School, worship, Wednesday night suppers, choir. I felt more ‘at home’ there than anywhere else in my world, except my own home.

That night, I was there because my parents were helping with the evening’s youth group activity. They had bought 20 pieces of poster board, all black...and paints in ‘psychedelic’ colors, as we called them then—paints designed to glow when you turned a black light on them. And my parents had even bought a black light for the occasion! I couldn’t believe my parents were this ‘cool,’ and I came along eager to see how it all turned out.

That question asked of me long ago still hangs in the air. In a hallway of my head and heart, as circumstances in life change, the question has been voiced to me again, and may still come unexpectedly, requiring an answer: “What are you doing here?”

This is the question asked in our text today. It is asked twice of the prophet Elijah by none other than God. It is not the part of the story that usually gets our attention.



No, the part of the story most of us know comes in verses 11 and 12. That's the showy part. Elijah up there on Mount Horeb, which is also called Mount Sinai, just like Moses before him, who hid in the cleft of a rock as God's glory passed by. Now it is Elijah who hides in a cave from the presence of God. God orders Elijah to come out and witness the power of God, but Elijah stays holed up. A wind comes so strong it splits mountains and shatters rocks; then an earthquake, then fire. And after all the racket, nothing—just sheer silence—which, after all the noise, had a sound of its own. A murmuring, a gentle whisper, a still, small voice are other translations. The sheer silence of God's presence coaxed Elijah, not out of the cave, but at least toward its entrance.

One biblical scholar after another says that we miss the point of chapter 19 if all we notice is that showy, dramatic part. I think we can be excused for our mistake because Elijah is one showy, dramatic prophet. This is the guy who conjures up food in a famine, raises a young man from the dead, holds a contest of the gods on Mount Carmel, slays 450 rival prophets of Baal, contends with Jezebel, and in a grand finale gets carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire.

But it turns out this story presents us with quite a different view of Elijah, one that can speak into our own lives and life together.

You'd think, after that decisive victory in the contest of the gods, that Elijah would feel invincible. But instead, he fell apart. A death threat from Jezebel arrived and by verse 3 Elijah is in a panic. In three rapid, short clauses, with three consecutive verbs: He feared, arose, fled for his life," Elijah's bravado is gone. In a mere five verses, Elijah high-tailed it from the Jezreel Valley in the heart of northern Israel all the way to the extreme southern boundary of the Southern kingdom of Judah.ⁱ One scholar calls him a burned-out prophet.ⁱⁱ

Along the way, Elijah starts throwing off the demanding life God had given him. First he left his servant behind in Beer-sheba. Then he removed himself from his own kingdom, Israel, to enter Judah. Then he leaves settled lands altogether to



enter the wilderness, where he is completely alone. Deeper into the wilderness he goes, now so isolated he sinks down under *one* broom tree, the text says. Broom trees don't usually grow alone, so this detail shows just how alone Elijah has become under that tree that is barely a shrub. He ran, but he can't escape his problems or the desert sun. Without and within, his problems overwhelm him. He cries out one word in Hebrew: *Rab!* Which means, "Enough!" Polite reverence for God is gone. Elijah now issues the orders to God: "Take my life." He has had enough and just wants it all to end. He wants out.ⁱⁱⁱ

Barbara Brown Taylor wonders: "Maybe it was the bloody contest on Mount Carmel. Sometimes, when you get exactly what you want, there can be a terrible vacuum afterwards. All the energy that helped you reach your goal suddenly deserts you and you do not have a clue what you are supposed to do next. You felt so strong going up the mountain. Now you don't know if your knees will hold you up on the way back down."

"Or maybe it was just exhaustion," Taylor supposes, "with one major thing happening right after another and no time to rest in between. First the prophets of Baal, then Jezebel, then the flight into the wilderness without anything to eat or drink. Separate those things by a week or so and they might be do-able, but one right on top of the other was like being in a war."

"Or maybe," she wonders, "Elijah was just tired of being a prophet. 'Thank you for this call, Lord, I fully recognize the privilege of serving you, but the truth is that I am just about called out right now. With all due respect, I quit.'"

"Whatever 'it' was, Elijah had had enough. 'It is enough,' he said, 'I want to die.'" And all Elijah wanted to do was sleep. "If you have ever suffered from depression, you may recognize this as one of the signs. A depressed person can sleep twenty hours and never feel rested. ...your eyes may open, but your brain says, 'Go back to sleep. You aren't up to this...'"^{iv} People suffering from depression often need the help of counseling and medication sometimes, too. All of us have times when we need extra support and encouragement.



It is challenging to know what to do. Even for God. With Elijah, God sends a messenger to the middle of nowhere to offer him food and drink. Elijah eats but falls asleep again. Next, the angel of God taps Elijah awake once more with another course of food and drink: “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” So, Elijah eats again, and this time it is, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “enough to live on. Enough not to die on.” But that is not the same as embracing life fully. Elijah indeed gets up and goes, but not on the journey God had in mind. Instead, he climbs that mountain and sinks into that cave.

That’s when the question comes first. The fundamental life question: “What are you doing here?” Depressed, exhausted, Elijah hides. Unable to see anything except his own hardship, Elijah responds with a litany of complaint and lament to God. How he alone has been faithful, how everyone else is the problem, and how threatened and afraid he is and how unfair this has all turned out to be.

God responds with that thunderous show. I suppose to remind Elijah that God is in charge so Elijah can feel emboldened and encouraged. But it doesn’t work. He refused to come out of the cave for God’s display. So next God tried a whisper. That didn’t work either, only moving Elijah near the cave’s entrance. That is a little progress, but he is still inside the cave of isolation and self-doubt and exhaustion and self-pity.

The existential, life-determining question that demands an answer comes a second time: “What are you doing here?” But Elijah just repeats himself, too. Same complaints, helplessness, and isolated self-focus.

Back in May, some of you may remember the news reports of Amanda Eller. A physical therapist and yoga instructor, she went for a hike in Maui and disappeared. Lost in the thick vegetation, she was finally found after 17 days with a fractured leg, a torn meniscus, severe sunburn, dehydration, and fifteen pounds lighter. In an interview after her miraculous rescue, she said those days had been the most difficult of her life. “There were times of total fear and loss and wanting



to give up,” she said. “It did come down to life and death and I had to choose,” she recalled. “I chose life—I wasn’t going to take the easy way out...even though that meant more pain and suffering. ...I heard this voice saying, ‘If you want to live, keep going.’”

Elijah was approaching his crisis quite differently and despite the voice of God urging him on, Elijah was stuck within himself. God remained present if not persuasive. Nourishment, encouragement, grand gestures, pointed questions had all fallen flat. So God gave something else instead: a plan, a purpose, a new assignment. “Go. Go back the way you came. Face what you fear most. Do the work I call you to do.” And for some reason, it worked. Maybe Elijah finally reached the choice, too, of life or death and knew that if he wanted to live, he’d have to keep going.

What is remarkable about this turn in the story is that nothing in Elijah’s outward circumstances had changed. Jezebel is still out to get him. Elijah does not receive special powers or the promise of success or relief from suffering and pain. Instead, God tells him to leave the cave of isolation and go out, go back. “What are you doing here? If you want to live, keep going.” God’s presence and God’s word do not always change our circumstances, but they do have the power to change how we will respond.^v

Barbara Brown Taylor says in its own way, this is a resurrection story. Elijah passes from his wish to die to his willingness to live.^{vi} And not merely to survive, but to live and serve faithfully—trusting God to keep us and transform our lives and our life together.

I have always loved the Jewish custom of saving an open seat for Elijah; of pouring a fifth cup of wine that is left on the table in case Elijah comes, heralding the Messiah, the righting of all that is wrong in the world, when justice is complete and peace fills all in all.



I had always assumed that the honoring and anticipation of Elijah must be due to the dramatic intensity of the prophet's life: His zeal for the Lord as he stood up against Baal and 450 of that false god's false prophets. Elijah's power to make food in a famine, to restore life to a young man, and his dramatic exit from the earth into heaven alive aloft a chariot of fire.

But now I wonder...if it is something else instead that makes us ready to remember and welcome him, raise a toast to him around our own tables where our own lives are hard, and difficult news must be borne, and painful decisions must be made, and unwanted circumstances faced. Perhaps it is not in the grandness of his story. The wind-splitting, earth-shaking, fire-breathing noise...nor even in the sheer silence that tiptoed after like a whisper.

Perhaps Elijah is welcome at the table because he has lived it all, too: The fear and exhaustion and disappointment that comes sometimes. The evaporated energy that helped you succeed but now leaves you unsure of what to do next. The exhaustion from so much disruption and change all at once that makes you just want to leave or be left alone. The tendency to hide from the hard things and blame others for whatever is wrong. The weariness for those called by God into community, where our life together can be as broken as it is beautiful. Maybe that is what Elijah is doing here. Our companion on the way who heard a voice say, "I understand how you feel. I'm here to help. But if you want to live, keep going."

Our last hymn today has an error in it. The first two verses hint at hardship. By verse 3, we are singing of griefs distressing. Then comes the 4th and last verse: Thus all my gladsome way along, I sing aloud God's praises That all may hear the grateful song My voice unwearied raises." But that's not right. *Glory to God* has restored the original wording: "Thus all my toilsome way along I sing aloud God's praises That all may hear the grateful song My voice unwearied raises. Be joyful in the Lord, my heart, both soul and body bear your part: To God all praise and glory!" When the way is gladsome, what is it to sing God's praises? Ah, but when our way is toilsome, well, to sing our grateful song, our voices unwearied raising...



Well, that takes faith, stamina, and trust that God's power will keep us and is able to transform us even though our circumstances remain the same. So, here's to Elijah, who shows us the way.

Amen.

ⁱ Jerome T. Walsh, **Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry, 1 Kings** (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 266.

ⁱⁱ Richard Nelson, **Interpretation: First and Second Kings** (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 122.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walsh, 267.

^{iv} Barbara Brown Taylor, "Four Stops in the Wilderness" in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2001, 7.

^v Insights gleaned from Jill Duffield's article "Looking into the Lectionary" in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, 2019.

^{vi} Taylor, 8.