

August 3, 2014

“Questions God Asks of Us: What Are You Doing Here?”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



1 Kings 19:11-13

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

This morning as our Summer Sermon Series “Questions God Asks Us” continues, we jump into the story of the great prophet, Elijah. But we do not find Elijah at his best or at the top of his game. Actually, one of the reasons the Bible is so very helpful to us is that it shows its heroes even at their low points. We see their flaws and their failings—and we can relate.

Elijah has been being a prophet. He's been doing his job. But in so doing, he has challenged Queen Jezebel and her priests over their worship of the gods of Baal and she ordered him put to death. Elijah fled to save his life. When we catch up with him this morning, he is so low and things seem so awful all around him, that he is in despair. See if any of this might sound familiar...there has been a terrible drought. War is raging all around. The people are falling away, not holding to their promises or their faith. Evil seems to be gaining the upper hand.

I suppose the only other thing that might have happened to make it all worse would have been for a 90-year-old water main to burst, wasting 20 million gallons of precious water and flooding roads and a university campus.

For us, too, it's been a tough couple weeks. Actually, as former Secretary of State Madeline Albright put it this week, with typical grave understatement: “The world is a mess.” And in times such as this, the spiritual task we must undertake is to not let our own hearts become a mess, letting violence and cynicism win. Not let our hearts be hardened, nor our hope recede to bitter memory.

This is exactly what has happened even to the great prophet Elijah. He's fled up a mountain, Mt. Horeb to be exact, and into a cave to escape it all. And what's he doing? He's complaining bitterly to God-- all the work you've done up to this point has clearly been for nothing, God. And everything I've tried to do has failed. Your people are scattered like idiot sheep. I'm the only faithful one left and I am alone and afraid and I don't much trust that you are even there anymore, God.

Have you ever been so beaten down by circumstances in your own life that you've felt this way? Have you ever looked out at our world in all its pain and suffering and felt this way? Have you ever felt that surely God has gone AWOL from your own life and everything you can see around you?

That's what Elijah was feeling. And in the cave into which he has withdrawn, he hears God reaching out to him, calling him: what are you doing here, Elijah?

It's a loaded question, loaded with meaning, and with invitation that Elijah is at first too despondent to grasp. Let's unpack this seemingly simple question. What are you doing here?

Five words. God asks: what are *you*—you, Elijah, you whose name means “My God is Yahweh, God,” what are you, Elijah, *doing*—closing yourself off, withdrawing from me, denying yourself my presence, my peace and power—what are you, Elijah, doing...*here*—on Mt. Horeb, the very place where I gave the stone tablets to Moses, the place where you can draw strength from your history, from my mighty presence in the story of this people?

What are *you...doing.... here*?

God is bringing Elijah back to consciousness, bringing him back to faith, bringing him back to life.

Is this not the perfect question for us this morning for such a time as this, when the world is a mess and our hearts are hurting, our minds confused? What are we doing here?

Above all this morning, we have come to listen, to make room, in the midst of it all, to hear the voice of God. A few weeks ago I quoted Dag Hammarskjöld, then General Secretary of the United Nations. He wrote in his journal this observation, surely about himself as well as for us as world events swirled around: “How will you be able to retain the ability to hear, when you will never listen? That God should have time for you, you seem to regard as equally self-evident as that you can't find time for God.”

We are here this morning to find time for God. God always has time for us. God makes time for us. The story helps us remember. One of the beautiful things about this story of Elijah is the way God's compassion comes through. God seems to follow Elijah up the mountain and into the cave. God knows Elijah's spirit is broken, his faith shattered, his despair deep. God aches for his broken heart. And our great God, the creator of the ends of the earth, the keeper of all time, the source of all power and might, this very God reaches into that cave to find Elijah and offers him a way out. Elijah, my own prophet—what are you doing here?

Let me suggest something, whispers God... 'Here in this place apart, my son, hear my voice. Here in this quiet place, remember who you are. Here, on this holy ground, find your sources of strength and courage.'

It's been a tough week. The world is a mess.

Let me suggest that we have come out of this crazy discombobulating week to this place that connects us with God and with the community of faith all around. We have made time to be with God, to listen for God. We have come to do those things that reconnect us—we come to pray, to sit in silence, to hear the Word of the Lord, to partake of the sacrament. We have come to remember who we are, remembering our name. We have come to remember whose we are, for the One who has promised is faithful.

Be fully present, here and now, to the presence of the living God, eager to find you here and to speak to your heart. Eager to remind you of things you may have forgotten, sources of strength, echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

God is here--hoping, yearning, asking: "what are you doing here?"

Let us enter into a time of silent prayer...

SILENCE

Notes:
Trevor Hudson. Questions God Asks Us. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2008.

Dag Hammarskjöld, Markings. 1963.

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