

“What Are You Doing Here?”
Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
June 6, 2010

Luke 8:34-39, I Kings 19:1-15

The text I was going to read from Luke 8 is a wonderful story and I commend it to your reading, but, in the interest of time, I am not going to read it today. Instead, I want to focus our attention on the text from I Kings 19. If you have been doing the Year of the Bible readings and are relatively current on them, you will have read this passage in the past couple of weeks. The story is about the prophet Elijah, a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 9th century B.C.E. Much of Elijah’s prophetic career happened during the reign of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Jezebel was a worshiper of Baal, a Canaanite fertility god. She tried with a great deal of success to get the people of Israel to worship Baal.

As our text begins, Elijah is on the run from Jezebel. She has sent men to track him down after the showdown with four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Following that contest, a sort of “whose god is more powerful” competition, which the God of Israel wins, Elijah has all the prophets of Baal gathered up and killed. If you’ve read the Old Testament, you know that there are times - particularly early on - when it portrays God as approving and even commanding such slaughter, but not in this instance. Elijah’s killing of the prophets of Baal seems to be what provokes Jezebel’s ire. *Read I Kings here.*

I want to start this morning with an apology. I want to start by saying, honestly, that this sermon may not be for you.

If you’ve never felt so overwhelmed by life and its challenges that you wished you didn’t have to face it, this sermon may not be for you.

If you’ve never felt threatened because of a stance you’ve taken as you were trying to do God’s will, this sermon may not be for you.

If you’ve never felt like you were all alone (or part of a very small group) in standing up for what is right, then this sermon may not be for you.

If you’ve never worried that the world we live in is going to hell in a hand basket, this sermon may not be for you.

If you’ve never longed to hear God speak in some dramatic way, to prove to you that God was there or somehow concerned with your plight or the plight of this world in which we live, then this sermon may not be for you.

If *none* of these things is true for you, I hope you’ll listen anyway. But if, like me, at least *one* of those things is true for you, then pay attention. You might benefit from looking with me at this episode from the life of the 9th century prophet Elijah...

As our passage from I Kings opens, Elijah is, to put it mildly, not in a good place. He’s scared, and he has every reason to be. After all, Queen Jezebel has just publicly threatened to destroy him. Somebody once said that you’re not paranoid if they really are out to get you. And Jezebel was out to get Elijah. She wanted him dead.

It was bad enough that Elijah just wouldn't be quiet about the God of Israel. But when Jezebel heard her husband Ahab's report about the contest on Mt. Carmel, well, that really made her angry. Her four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal had worked all day and couldn't coax even a tiny little spark out of Baal for a burnt offering. Then Elijah's God had brought fire down from heaven and consumed his sacrifice, just like that, even after Elijah had drenched it all with so much water that you'd think nothing could burn.

What made Jezebel even angrier was what Elijah had done next. He'd told the people to seize every last one of her four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and then Elijah killed them all. All four hundred and fifty of them, dead...

When Jezebel heard the news, she sent a message to Elijah, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I don't make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." It is no wonder Elijah is scared. But he's not just scared, he's also depressed. You can hear it in his words. "Enough of this, God. Take my life. I'm no better than my ancestors. I'm no better than the worst skeletons in my family tree's closet. I'm just a loser." Those of us who are younger might think of the lyrics from Beck's song, "*Soy un perdidor. I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me?*" It doesn't take a psychologist or school counselor to know that when you hear that kind of language, you're dealing with depression. Those are words to be taken seriously. Elijah is overwhelmed. "Enough already," he says. He's wishing himself dead. And he's full of shame, "I'm no better than the people who came before me."

Before we go any further, it is important to acknowledge that is quite possible to be scared without being depressed. A little fear *can* make you feel *alive* - as long as you push through it. Fear does not always lead to depression. But when you allow fear to paralyze you, when it causes you to repress your truest self, when you begin to feel there's no way out, that you're all alone, and you add to that the sense that you somehow have brought it all on yourself, that's what leads to depression.

And I think the sense that he brought it on himself was what really caused Elijah to become despondent. Because somewhere down deep, I think, he may feel like he's brought this situation on himself. He knows he's overstepped his bounds. He's made his own mess by killing all of those prophets. Nowhere in the text (and I looked this up) nowhere in the text did it say that God asked him to kill them. God didn't tell him to do that. And a God who was powerful enough to bring fire down from heaven onto an offering soaked to the bone with water could surely have blasted Elijah's enemies if that's what God wanted to do. But I don't think God wanted that. God could have handled the destroying on God's own. But Elijah took it into his own hands. Just like Moses striking the rock, he took it into his own hands - and now he was regretting that decision.

Some of you know that the movie *Scent of a Woman* with Al Pacino is one of my favorites. You may have even heard my impression of Pacino. There's a scene in which the blind Colonel Frank Slade and the prep school kid, Charlie, are in a car being driven around. "What's the matter with you?" Slade says to Charlie. "This car feels heavy. You know why? You got the weight of the world on your shoulders." Elijah's got the weight of the world on his shoulders. That's what can happen when we get confused about our role and God's role.

So Elijah, depressed as he was, left his servant behind and went off all by himself, coming to rest under a solitary broom tree. I think the scripture is trying to make a point here. A tree by itself: just perfect for a man all by himself. Depression isolates a person - makes him or her feel all alone. Those of you who have been there know exactly what I mean.

Thank heaven God provides for us even in the midst of such episodes. Here's the first big lesson of this text, by the way. Even when Elijah is off by himself, cut off from the world, fearful and depressed,

God somehow provides for him. When Elijah's out there in the wilderness, an angel, a messenger of God, touches him. "Get up and eat. Take a little nourishment, Elijah; you've got a long journey ahead."

So here's another lesson from the text. If you, yourself are depressed, look for angels. If you're not, then be an angel:

Not the kind of angel that has wings or a halo, but the kind that might bring some food...

The kind of angel that might tell you to get up and take a little nourishment...

The kind of angel that might share a word of encouragement, or send a card...

The kind of angel that might kick you in the tail and tell you to keep going...

The kind of angel that might say, "You know, you're important to me. I'm glad you're a part of my life."

That kind of angel can't fix you, but he or she can feed you. And they can let you know they care.

As for the real healing, the deep healing, *that* can come only from an encounter with God. That's where Elijah goes next in today's text. He has a long journey ahead of him to the mountain of God. And the angel points him in that direction.

The cakes were enough to keep Elijah going, but for real healing, he needed an encounter with God. So he journeyed forty days and forty nights to get to Mt. Horeb. When he got there, he lodged in a cave. That's when the word of the Lord came to him for the first time. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And he responded by whining, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, because the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets - and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away."

One of the great things about being a Presbyterian minister is our denomination's emphasis on continuing education for the clergy. I just came back a few weeks ago from my favorite conference, the Festival of Homiletics, which took place in Nashville this year. The great thing about that conference is that for four and a half days, the people who go to that event are inundated in good preaching and teaching. Morning, afternoon, and evening, we listen to sermons and lectures from the finest mainline preachers in America. And at breaks, mealtimes, and the end of the day, we get together with our fellow minister friends, when we can find them in the crowd, and we talk.

Let me tell you a secret about those conversations. From time to time, the talk turns to the churches we serve. Those who are interested in projecting a good image will boast about how well things are going in their little corner of God's kingdom. But after a while, we usually spend at least a little time talking about the things that drain us: the pettiness, the frustration, the overwhelming need in the world and in our church, the times we wonder why God called us into this profession anyway. Never happens with me, of course! Occasionally, and I hate to hear it, someone will talk about how they are under attack. In their words you can hear echoes of Elijah, "The people have forsaken your covenant, God. I alone am left and they're seeking to destroy me."

So we listen, we encourage, we commiserate. And by the end of the week, something amazing happens. After a week of listening to good preaching, and sharing food and fellowship, people who came

in feeling isolated leave feeling supported and connected. People who came in feeling drained, leave feeling recharged.

I think I know why. It's not because we've heard good preaching, although we do and that doesn't hurt. It's not because we've had creative and moving experiences of worship, although that helps, too. It's not even because we've shared our joys and concerns, our anxieties and our triumphs with others like us - as important as that is. It's because, somehow, some way, we've managed to hear the still, small voice of God in the midst of it all. And do you know what that voice says to tired preachers - and anxious, fearful, exhausted parishioners?

Elijah found out. When he went to the mountain of God, he was expecting a dramatic encounter with God. So when the word of the Lord came to him the first time, I think he missed it. The word came in the form of a question. "What are you doing here?" Speaking for depressed people everywhere, Elijah poured out his self-righteous whine: "I'm all alone here, God, everybody's against me. I, even I only am left." So God said, "Go stand on the mountain before the Lord. You want to hear God speak, Elijah? Go stand on the mountain before the Lord." So Elijah did what he was told. I can see him there. "Okay, I'm ready."

*And there was a wind, strong enough to shatter rocks,
but God wasn't in the wind.*

*And there was an earthquake,
but God wasn't in the earthquake.*

*And there was a fire,
but God was not in the fire.*

Only then did God speak. Out of the sheer silence, a still small voice, asking the question it had asked before.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

When I was in seminary, I did a fifteen-month clinical pastoral education internship as a chaplain in a geriatric care facility. One of the goals of Clinical Pastoral Education is to help pastors in training learn how to be better at pastoral care - including listening to people's needs and mediating the presence of God to them. But another goal of CPE, just as important, is to help pastors in training come to claim their pastoral identity. What it means to be a pastor.

So CPE is an intensive experience. It involves a lot of reflection. People that go through it have weekly meetings with their supervisor, and a number of group sessions each week with other intern chaplains going through the program with them. It can be a real drag.

Of all the meetings I had with my supervisor, this is the one I remember most clearly. I came into Kerry's office and sat down on the couch. He was late, again. I was tired and frustrated, just getting adjusted to married life, figuring out how to negotiate what being married means while living in a little two room cinder block apartment, not much bigger than our office.

It had not been a good week, and all I wanted was to get this session behind me. Kerry, my supervisor, came in late. Sat down in the chair across from me. I waited for him to say something. "Let's get this over with," I thought. Nothing. No earthquake, no wind, no fire. He just looked at me. Fifteen minutes passed (and I know it was fifteen because I was looking at my watch). Still nothing. Then finally

Kerry said to me, “How do you want to use this time?” I can’t remember exactly what I said or how the rest of the session went. I just remember the question, and how angry it made me.

It took me years, but I finally understood it. In the sound of sheer silence, and in his still small voice speaking out of it, my supervisor was asking me the same question God asked Elijah. “What are you doing here?”

Like Elijah, it was a question I had to answer for myself. Nobody could answer it for me. For my supervisor at that point, the question had to do with how I was going to use those remaining forty-five minutes in his office, but I see now that it had a deeper application - an application that touched the whole of my life.

So, if you can relate to Elijah,
 if you know what it is to feel like the world is going to hell in a hand basket,
 or to feel scared, depressed, and just plain overwhelmed by the challenges of life,
 if you feel all alone,
 or are wishing God would speak to you in some dramatic way, I invite you to consider
 that God might be speaking to you right now....

“What are you doing here? Not just here at Immanuel, hoping to meet me in this hour of worship,” God says, “But what are you doing here on earth? Here in relationship with me?”

“If your answer is that you’re here to complain about life, I’ve heard that before. If you’re here to lament that the world has gone to hell, I’ve heard that before, too. If you’re here to let me know that you feel scared, depressed, and abandoned, go right ahead. Get all of that off your chest. Then, when you’re ready, listen. What are you doing here?”

“Are you here to lament how the world is changing? Or are you here to learn what it is to love? Are you here to have your preconceived ideas reinforced? Or are you here to learn what it is to follow me? Are you here to protect yourselves and your children? Or are you here to find abundant life and be led into a truth that makes you vulnerable? What are you doing here?”

About a month ago, Judith and I had the chance to have some old friends over to dinner. Jerry Van Marter and Eva Stimson both work for our denomination. Jerry is the director of Presbyterian News Services and Eva is the editor of Presbyterians Today. We came to know them because we were Eva’s parent’s pastors. Some time ago, Jerry shared with me the text of a speech he’d given on the occasion of being named a distinguished alumnus of San Francisco Theological Seminary.

He started off his speech by saying that his toenails were painted sparkly blue. His twelve year old daughter had painted her dad’s toenails. After talking about having blue toenails, Jerry went on and talked about what he’d learned in his thirty years after seminary, and what he noticed had changed and what had remained the same, and then he said that one of the things he’d noticed was that a lot of people who went to seminary with him had dropped out of ministry. And he said something like this, “Let me tell you how I have stayed in ministry.” And his words apply not just to pastors; they apply to any and all of us of us who are going about the business of living a life of faith. He talked about holding onto his friends, finding good mentors, appreciating his network of colleagues, taking care of himself, and having a great family. And then he said, and here I quote,

“Most importantly, every morning, I remind myself that it’s not about me, it’s about God. It’s never about what I’m doing, but about what God in Christ is doing in me. I’ve been a Presbyterian all my life, but it’s not about the Presbyterian Church, it’s

about God. I love my job at the Presbyterian Center, but it's not about my institution or any other, it's about God. It's on the very bad days and on the very good days that we're most tempted to believe that it's all about us. But it never is.

"That's why today - a great day - I'm particularly grateful to my daughter Rachel, for painting my toenails sparkly blue...and while doing so saying, 'Pretty hard to feel like a big shot when you're walking around with sparkly blue toenails, huh, Dad?'"

So, what are you doing here?

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

ⁱ This is from a copy of his speech which Jerry emailed me. It was later published in the alumni newsletter of San Francisco Theological Seminary.