

# **“What are you Doing Here?”**

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1 Kings 19:1-18

The story of Elijah read today happens soon after the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. The prophets of Baal were the leaders in idol worship of the god, Baal, while Elijah was a follower of the one true God, creator of heaven and earth. Elijah proposes a test: the prophets of Baal would prepare a bull to sacrifice on an altar, and Elijah would do the same, but they would not set fire to it. Instead, they would call on their gods to send fire from heaven. Of course, the prophets of Baal couldn't get anything to happen, but when it's Elijah's turn, he begins by dumping buckets of water over everything. Then, after he prays to God, fire comes from heaven and burns up the bull, the altar, as well as the water, and the people who were watching are convinced that Elijah's God is the one true God. After that, Elijah has the prophets of Baal killed, and king Ahab and his wife Jezebel are angry and begin searching for Elijah to kill him. Elijah flees for his life. Finally, he sits down and asks God that he would die. He lies down, ready to give up...

I thought that this is quite a contrast to his huge triumph in the contest with the prophets of Baal. God performs an incredible miracle and all the people watching are drawn to believe in the one true God! Elijah must have been totally happy that God worked through him in that way. I'd feel like I could do anything! Nothing is impossible with God! I'd imagine myself thinking, OK God, what now? What kind of amazing things can we do together next, in order to show more people your awesome power?...

What a contrast to see Elijah, not long after that, running for his life, and then giving up, lying down, ready to die! Maybe he had hoped that his triumph in the contest with the prophets of Baal would be enough to convince the king and his wife to turn to the one true God. Instead, they choose not to look at the evidence and start looking for Elijah, to kill him. He goes from the high of being a superstar miracle worker with God, to the low of self-pity, ready to die.

I can identify with that kind of mood change, although less extreme. I think of times in my life where I've had a great experience – maybe it's at a gathering with friends where we can't stop laughing because it was just so fun, or it may have been a special program I've participated in where I felt God's Spirit at work, beyond what I could do on my own. The excitement of those great times can last for a couple of days, but then I have trouble with my computer, or I just can't seem to solve a problem that comes up. Suddenly, I've completely forgotten how God had been at work in my life, blessing me with great times with friends, or great experiences. All I can think of is the new problem that I'm stuck with, and my mood goes right down. Have you ever gone quickly from a great mood, feeling you can do anything, to a low mood because of a new problem that has come up? I think it is natural for many people. We hope we can stay in the state of happiness without ever dipping down into negativity, yet our world is imperfect. We are imperfect, and there will always be new challenges, and times of suffering. They are a part of life. The point is, during those low points in life, do we take the time to listen for God's voice?

As Elijah lies down, ready to die, he feels all alone, abandoned by God. Yet, it's interesting that God sends angels to care for him. He's in the wilderness, in the middle of nowhere, and falls asleep. When he wakes up, he feels an angel's touch. I don't know if he actually saw the angel. We are not told what the angel looked like, but Elijah hears the angel tell him to get up and eat. What he sees is food and water. By that time, he's probably hungry and thirsty and so he eats. This happens twice. The angel tells him he must eat in order to gain strength for the coming journey. Elijah then continues walking for 40 days and nights to the mountain of God, Mt. Horeb. Mt. Horeb (another name for Mt. Sinai) is significant. That's where the Israelites and Moses met God and received the 10 Commandments.

Elijah had given up, but encouraged by the food and support provided by the angel, he decides to seek God at the special mountain. There, the word of God comes to Elijah, “What are you doing here?” Elijah answers, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” Elijah had been faithful to God. He had risked himself in the contest with the prophets of Baal. Now, he feels totally alone, with

everyone against him. God tells him to go stand on the mountain and wait. God will pass by. I find it interesting that Elijah experiences all sorts of wild weather that may suggest God's powerful presence. There was wind that split mountains and broke rocks to pieces, an earthquake, and a fire, but God wasn't revealed through any of these. Then came "the sound of sheer silence." That is where Elijah sensed God's presence. He hid his face and waited for God's word.

Sometimes God speaks to us with great power. We may be shaken by a traumatic experience that gets us thinking about what is important in life, or we may be surprised by God's word coming to us through a conversation with someone, giving us a good, new idea that we had never thought about before. Sometimes, God's word to us comes like a "kick in the pants" such as through someone who confronts us with something we've done wrong...

Most of the time, though, God speaks with us in a "still, small voice". To hear it, we need to focus on listening. It takes practice to let go of the distracting thoughts voices that clamor in our heads for attention as we try to get a sense of what God is telling us. Prayer is not just asking God for help, or thanking God for what God has done. A big part of prayer is listening for God's voice in your heart, making space for God to give us a word.

As Elijah waits to hear from God, he hears a second time, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And, Elijah again responds with his zeal for following God, and his complaint that he's the only follower of God left, and people are trying to kill him. God then tells him to return and anoint two new kings, as well as a new prophet, Elisha. In doing this, Elijah would be going directly against king Ahab and Jezebel, but God is encouraging him to not fear. God's purposes will be fulfilled, there will be new kings, and they will get rid of all the opposition. Elijah feels alone, but God concludes by saying that there are still 7,000 people left who do not follow Baal. Elijah is actually not alone.

We may sometimes feel alone. Have you experienced encouragement during times when you felt alone? Maybe you sensed the support of an angel. God may give encouragement through a friend, or even through an encounter with a stranger. Often, it's the church community that provides encouragement. I remember a time when I wasn't feeling well, and a church member prepared a special chicken soup for me, with healthy bone-broth. Another time, I remember wondering how we are going to be able move our family to a new location. There was just so much work to do. Then, I was surprised to see how many church members came to help us. They also brought food and worked very hard.

If you're a part of a Christian community, you never need to feel completely alone. There will always be people who care for you. Of course, the church is not perfect, and sometimes has problems making it difficult to function well. In that case, we can still rely on God. In the book of Deuteronomy chapter 31, verse eight it says, "It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed." And, in the book of Romans, Paul says that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our LORD. God showed his love for us by coming to live on earth through his Son, Jesus. Jesus entered our sinful world, and took the weight of our sin, to the point of dying on a cross. Sin is that power that is beyond our control. It pulls us away from God, and often causes us to become more and more self-centred. Through Jesus rising to life, we see that the power of sin and death had been broken. We now have forgiveness through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of All. No matter where we are, we can trust that Jesus walks with us.

If we've ever had a time where we've felt discouraged and alone, and we're looking for an answer from God. We may receive a command like Elijah did. "Go and wait at the mountain and wait for the Lord..." In our heart we may sense that it's time to listen for God's instruction. We may also sense something like the second command to Elijah. "Go, return to Damascus...". Get back into your regular life and face the problem. Along with this word, we may receive some word of encouragement. Elijah would have been encouraged to hear that he is not alone. There will be new kings to replace the evil ones. There will remain 7,000 who would not follow the ways of idol worship like the others.

What are you doing here? Is God asking you that question? We may feel depressed and ready to die like Elijah. Or we might just get stuck in our routines, feeling like nothing meaningful has

happened for a while. Or what about our church? What are we doing here? As a church we have many challenges. After moving to Japan, I had hoped that soon we could have new in-person leadership, but unfortunately that didn't happen. We've been blessed to have Sanae and Miwako working hard to keep in-person worship going, along with online worship. We've also been blessed to have Yoko preaching regularly and supporting the church in so many ways. Now, Sanae has moved to a new church. Yoko will be studying in January and not able to continue responsibilities. It is time for us to seriously seek God's leading for the future. Will we need to close the church? Is there a creative new way in which we can continue? Whatever ideas we may have, it is important to seek God's word. Let's take time to truly listen for it!

Going back to the story of Elijah, notice how God spoke to him. When he was ready to give up, twice God sent encouragement through food and water in the wilderness. God knows our weakness, and by God's grace we receive what we need to continue on. Elijah spent 40 days and 40 nights walking to the mountain of God. Sometimes it takes a long, long time to get a clear sense of direction from God. We may hope for a clear voice in our heart, but we may only be able to hear it once we quiet all the other thoughts that are distracting us. Sometimes the distraction may be that we are ignoring an area where we need to repent.

God may be asking us, "What are you doing here? Are you comfortable with continuing the way you have been? Or, are you seeking change? Are you ready to hear my suggestion?" I know I often feel like I need to change somehow, but deep down I feel a bit of hesitation to open my heart and truly ask God what I need to do. It's because God's answer is often a challenge to me. It may mean that I need to do something that is not very comfortable. But, once I've sensed that challenge in my heart, I am obligated to follow. If I don't, I know my relationship with God will suffer. May each of us learn to hear more and more that "still, small voice" of God encouraging us in the right direction. As a prayer, I'd like to conclude using words from Psalm 25. Let's pray.

O LORD; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you we wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of our youth or our transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember us, for your goodness' sake, O LORD." Amen.