

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures 1 Kings 19:1-15a

What Are You Doing Here?

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How many times have you been asked the question ... *What are you doing here?* When you were a mischievous little child probing the deep dark secrets of your parent's bedroom ... and one of them suddenly walked into the room ... you certainly heard that question ... WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? Fear suddenly overwhelmed you.

Maybe when you got a little older ... the question began to take on new meaning. A friend catches you late in the library studying for an exam ... *What are you doing here?* "DUH," ... you answer ... "what do you think I'm doing here?"

Sometimes it's even rewarding to hear that question ... like when your boss walks in the office on a Saturday morning and catches you putting in some extra time ... *What are you doing here?* And you proudly answer, "Oh, just tweaking the Johnson contract for our presentation on Monday."

However, there are other times when that question hits you like a bolt of lightning ... those times when God comes into your life when everything seems to be coming unglued ... and asks you, *What are you doing here?*

I remember a time like that in my life when I used to hide in my basement. That's where my office was ... downstairs in the basement ... it was like going into a cave. I would often sit alone down there ... and just worry. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I worked so hard ... I did things for my church and community ... I worked hard at making my little newspaper grow.

Why didn't things turn out the way I wanted them to turn out? But things weren't going well with my business ... I was getting frustrated ... I was actually quite scared. I didn't know what I was going to do? I really didn't believe I had any options but to just keep on doing the same thing. That's when God asked me ... *What are you doing here?*

It seems that the great prophet Elijah is facing a similar dilemma in our scripture reading this morning. He, too, ends up hiding in a cave ... he's frustrated and really doesn't know what to do with his life. That's when God finds him ... and asks ... *What are you doing here?*

Listen with your hearts and minds to our reading from 1 Kings, chapter 19, verses 1-15. See how you answer God's question. I will be reading from the New Revised Standard Version.

19:1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

19:2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."

19:3 Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs

to Judah; he left his servant there.

19:4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

19:5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat."

19:6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

19:7 The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

19:8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

19:9 At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

19:10 He answered, "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."

19:11 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;

19:12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

19:13 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?"

9:14 He answered, "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."

19:15a Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in

Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. **Amen.**

Poor guy. Elijah seems so depressed. All he wants to do is lie down in the desert and die ... just end it all. Now why would he do that ... this great prophet of God? After all ... in the preceding chapter of 1 Kings, Elijah just won a great contest against 450 pagan prophets who worshiped Ba'al. He not only beats them in a fire starting contest ... he wipes them off the face of the earth.

This fabulous miracle should prove once and for all to Elijah and the people what God can do ... Yahweh alone is the God of the people of Israel. The God of Abraham and Moses ... who has always been faithful ... is still faithful ... we can trust God to guide us ... even when some people aren't happy about it ... like Queen Jezebel.

Because no sooner than Elijah is doing his victory dance ... Queen Jezebel puts out a death warrant on him. So why doesn't he just stand his ground against this evil queen? Surely after all he's just gone through ... witnessing the mighty power of God ... he can face up to one more thing in his calling ... in his journey with the Lord.

But no ... the scriptures tell us that he's literally scared for his life ... and off he goes running into the desert. No doubt about it ... Elijah is having a faith crisis ... one of those times when you really wonder who God is and what it is God is trying to get you to do.

For such a long time Elijah's followed the will of God, but now it seems that all he gets in return for his faithful devotion are death threats. Doesn't he deserve a little something better in return for his efforts ... you know ... like maybe a little respect ...

"Shouldn't the people listen to me now since God certainly seems to be on my side ... and Queen Jezebel and King Ahab ... what more do I have to do to show them who's in charge?"

But no one seems to care. He's a wanted man. And I believe he's had enough ... this thing with God just isn't working out too well for him.

But God won't leave him alone. Because even there ... in a cave in the desert ... God comes to him in his moment of crisis and asks him ... *What are you doing here?* The truth is ... it can be down right frustrating following the will of God.

Sometimes it can make you extremely unpopular ... and it can even be dangerous. You can hear the same intense frustration in the words of the psalmist ... *I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?" Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?* (Psalm 42:9-11)

I've had conversations with missionaries who openly wondered with me if their efforts in far off places were really making a difference ... as they became consumed in their work for the Lord by fighting the red tape of local governmental bureaucracies while at the same time struggling with the loss of support from back home.

I've talked with pastors who work as hospice chaplains who must meet strict quotas in their work which greatly interferes with their ability to provide quality pastoral care and compassion to grieving families.

I've watched an outstanding local pastor who has taken his church from the edge of closing to new vitality and growth ... only for him to be consumed in a legal quagmire as two church members bring denominational charges and a host of civil lawsuits against what he is doing to "THEIR" church.

And even me ... I've been here at Columbia Presbyterian Church for quite a few years as your pastor. I've worked side by side with you in all kinds of outreach ministries ... we have outstanding worship and music ... we experience wonderful fellowship and care for one another ... we are an inviting church that shares whatever we can with whoever is in need.

So why do we still rope off pews ... shouldn't we be more concerned about running out of space? Shouldn't our bank account have a bit more money in it so we didn't have to worry week to week about meeting expenses? Shouldn't God be blessing us in those tangible kinds of ways for our dedication?

And so ... like Elijah ... we can become frustrated ... maybe even scared sometimes ... as we fall into our own faith crisis. We wonder ... why aren't all of our efforts being more rewarded? Why are we still struggling when we devote so much of our time and energy to following God's will into strange places and doing things we probably never dreamed we'd do?

Sometimes God just frustrates the heck out me and I, too, want to climb into a cave. And then ... out of all the chaos surrounding my life, I once again hear the words of God asking me ... *What are you doing here?*

What are you doing here? That's actually one of the best questions in the entire Bible ... and I believe it is a question each of us must answer sometime in our own faith journey ... it's a question we'll probably have to answer more than once ... *What are you doing here?*

It's a question we must face when we wonder if we can keep on trusting God. *What are you doing here?* You see ... God had an important role for Elijah to play in the lives of the Hebrew people. They were struggling ... torn between the pagan religious practices of their King and the roots of their Hebrew tradition and faith.

And Elijah was chosen by God to stand in the chaos of that time as a powerful symbol and voice of God's covenant with his chosen people ... to remind the people of God's love for them and to call them to turn around ... and to be faithful once again.

Now I'm sure Elijah had his own ideas how everything should play out ... I'm sure the great prophet thought that with the defeat of Baal ... the people would see their folly and finally return to God and overthrow King Ahab. But God's ways are not our ways ... God's thoughts are not our thoughts ... and that can be hard on us ... particularly when our plans ... what WE think

should happen ... just don't seem to work out the way we think they should.

But there in the desert ... God still walks with Elijah ... caring for him when he was at his weakest ... providing everything he needs to continue on his journey for the Lord ... even though he didn't want to continue that journey.

I suspect Elijah could have stayed in that cave for the rest of his life ... but it is there that God asks him again that simple yet thought-provoking question ... *What are you doing here?* ... giving Elijah a moment to reflect on his life ... to witness the chaos of this world in earthquake, fire and wind ... and to even hear the stillness of silence ... to look back and remember that God has always been faithful ... that God has always provided.

And I suspect that Elijah even prayed the prayer of the Psalmist ... *Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.* (Psalm 42:11)

At that moment in the desert when Elijah finally comes out of that cave and continues on his journey ... he has no idea what lies in store for him. But just maybe he is beginning to learn something ... to learn that he can trust God ... that he can leave his own burden behind ... that he can let go of everything he thought must happen or should happen in this world ... and just rely on the simple knowledge that he can trust the Lord.

Even here at Columbia Presbyterian Church ... God still asks us again and again ... *What are you doing here?* That's when we can remember, too. Because we have a history with God—and we know God's been faithful no matter what. It's all about trusting God to lead us. And if we're REALLY doing God's will, we can be sure that NOT everybody will be happy about it, just like Jezebel wasn't happy.

But it all comes down to that moment in the cave, and God's provision and encouragement. We're serving GOD, and his approval is what matters most. That's when we remember how God is moving us into places that just a couple of years ago we'd never believe we'd be found ... Food Co-Ops feeding hundreds of people ... a Community Garden for our new friends from Myanmar ... a deeper relationship with the homeless children of Our House ... a monthly communion service for the residents at Coventry Place ... a new connection with the Food Closet at Project Take Charge just down the street ... and a place of hospitality for a new refugee family seeking to make their home in this country ... even as we continue to feed homeless women and children at Hagar's House ... fill up the pantry of Decatur Emergency Assistance Ministry ... and provide meeting space for community organizations ... Girl Scouts ... and AA meetings.

So what are you doing here? ... What are we doing here? Quite simply we are learning to trust God ... together ... as a community of faith ... we are learning to follow God's will and not our own will ... we are learning to be true disciples of Jesus Christ and to trust that God has a plan and a mission for this church ... and all we have to do is to continue to let the Spirit guide us. It's not easy.

And sometimes you just have to go and hide in a cave. But God will be there to provide for you

... always. We can't see what God sees. We can't understand what God understands. We can't even see OURSELVES as God sees us. But we don't have to worry, because our Lord knows about our frustrations ... our fears ... our discouragement.

And God continues to provide all that we will need – guidance, strength for the journey, and the eternal comfort of the Spirit's presence.

So When God asks, "What are you doing here?" ... we are being asked to remember ... to refocus and to continue trusting the Spirit's guidance no matter what. And when we stop and answer the Lord's question from our hearts, filled with love for him, we find peace of mind again, and great, great joy in serving the Lord.

Let us pray:

Breathe through the heats of our desire

Thy coolness and Thy balm;

Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;

Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,

O still, small voice of calm!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.