

What Are You Doing Here?

1 Kings 19: 1-15a Luke 8: 26-39

The sermon title speaks of a moment of confusion; someone is not where they should be. They're out of place, out of context, doing something whose purpose seems obscure. It's that sense of not belonging where you are.

Perhaps you've ventured into a strange place, a strange neighborhood, a strange environment, and you ask yourself: What am I doing here? Or worse, someone comes up to you and asks: What are *you* doing *here*?

The question suggests that the one who has moved out of place needs to withdraw and go back to their rightful place. Well, you may ask yourself: If I don't belong here, where on earth do I belong?

In another case of trying to penetrate our comfort and security zones, we find in scripture that God is regularly leading people – his servants – into places where normally they don't belong, and certainly wouldn't venture if left to their own devices. Here we resume Elijah's story.

We've already had the showdown with the prophets of Ba'al, when Elijah stood alone as the only remaining prophet of Yahweh-God. We heard how Yahweh-God poured out an all-consuming fire on the offering while the prophets of Ba'al failed to generate any fire from their gods on their offering.

At the end of that showdown, all the prophets of Ba'al and Asherah are slain by the people on Elijah's command. This **really** ticked off Queen Jezebel. Those were the prophets of **her** gods.

Our passage in chapter 19 begins with the queen sending a messenger with the threat that she would do to Elijah what he had done to her prophets. Elijah flees into the desert wilderness.

We hear the prophet's despair, his sense of failure, grief, and weakness. Sitting under a broom tree, he laments the reversal of his fortune, saying, "I've had enough, Lord. Take my life; I'm no better than my ancestors."

Instead, God repeatedly ministers to him, sustaining him as he resumes his desert journey to Mt. Horeb (alt=Sinai), the mountain of God. At this first stopping point in the wilds of Beersheba, he's already far enough from Ahab and Jezebel to be safe. But safety is not the aim of his trek. Mt. Horeb is his goal. Elijah seeks to stand in God's presence on God's sacred mountain once again, to give an account. Once at the mountain and huddled in a cave, God asks his prophet that discomfiting question: *What are you doing here, Elijah?*

Elijah explains his predicament; he's been zealous in his mission, but God's people have rejected him, they trashed the Temple, and executed his servants. He whimpers, *I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too*. He is beaten and broken by this ordeal. He fears for his life, and he fears having failed God's task.

God promises to show his presence to Elijah, calling him to the mouth of the cave. Then a terrible **wind** strips the mountain's rocks, followed by a thunderous **earthquake** and then a **firestorm**. In all these awesome events, God was **not in** any of them. Then comes (literally in Hebrew) *the sound of fine silence*, translated familiarly as a "still, small voice," as a whisper.

Read this closely. God is known to Elijah in the **utter silence** after the dramatic displays of power. For some reason, translators don't like the idea of silence. Yet it's the silence that the text requires us to recognize **first** as the presence of God. This silence is more immeasurable, more vast and infinite than any earthly cataclysm.

Then God's voice returns in a surprising whisper, repeating the first question: *What are you doing here, Elijah?* Elijah repeats his earlier answer in the exact same words as the first time. This repetition shows that for Elijah, nothing's changed. Elijah doesn't get the point of God's demonstration. God is not simply a visible power showcased by a dramatic intervention in the natural order. Rather God is an active presence that's more often unnoticed, unheard, and unrecognized amid the din and fury of other things happening. **Only** when all is quiet can God be **recognized**. Then the awesome power of God may be understood as well.

Elijah had lost sight of God in his chaotic struggle, in the swift turn from stunning victory to the adversity of being hunted as prey. Elijah's vision for God's work was lost when adversity came upon him and fear overcame him. He saw himself alone and a failure in the end.

In fact, God was there all along, ministering to him on the way to victory at Carmel, ministering to him again in defeat. God ministered to him on the desert trek of despair, and ministered to him now on the mountaintop. Nothing's changed. God has *always* been there, the power behind and **beyond** the authority given to Elijah.

So God has to spell it out: *Go back the way you came*. This means: 'your work isn't done, and you standing around out here in the desert on this mountain won't accomplish it.' Elijah wasn't called merely to sit in the presence of God on Mt. Horeb. He was called to serve, authorized to act, and empowered to do his mission. God graciously turns around his cowering servant. God renews and strengthens him, and sends him back to complete the still-unfolding process of God's sacred will.

God's servants – that's us – should listen for God's voice as it asks, *What are you doing here?* It challenges us to respond to the question of what are we doing with our gifts, what are we doing with our time, with our energy, with our lives that fulfills God's will for the Kingdom. It is a check on our comforting belief that if we go to church, put money in the plate, and pray once in a while, then we're right where we belong.

Sometimes, that is exactly where we belong. But our lives change and our circumstances get altered. Life unfolds, and we and our life situations become new. It is good for us to hear The Voice that challenges us: *What are you doing here?*

Like it was for Elijah, in this challenging question to us, we're called to discover God anew, set aside our fears and misgivings, our ease, comfort, and security, to stand boldly on our faith once again, and recover God's purpose as our focus. This needs to happen even amid the shambles of what seems to be the failure of our faithful efforts. We're called back, called to continue the task, and to allow God's process to be fulfilled.

Let's now consider Luke's story when Jesus faces a demon-possessed man. For this story, we need to imagine someone who presents an incredibly fearful visage. This is someone who is not only avoided, but feared. He is reckless, crazy, unpredictable, and violently dangerous. He wore no clothes, didn't live in a house, but skulked around the tombs.

The man (or his demon) meets Jesus screaming, *What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God? I beg you, don't torture me.*

That question: *What do you want with me?* is a variant of the previous question, *What are you doing here?* The question is not about location here, but relationship.

Jesus gets recognized immediately. Having named him accurately, there is no confusion or doubt about Jesus' identity.

But Jesus wants to know about the demon. Having the demon's name enables Jesus to recognize what he faces and deal with it appropriately. It's an important point for us. We need to **name** our fears, our challenges, our doubts, our sinfulness when we find them. We must name them if we're ever to stand faithfully above their power to control, hinder, and void the promise and blessing of God for us.

The demon's name is "Legion." This name wasn't pulled from a hat. No individual is named "Legion" in scripture except this demon. And you know enough about the history of the Roman Empire to know that "Legion" is a large Roman military force of 6-10,000 soldiers. The province of Judea was quite familiar with "Legion." "Legion" was what happened to rebellious regions, disobedient towns, and independent uprisings. "Legion" was the vicious, brutal projection of the Empire's power. "Legion" comes out of its encampment and delivers its horror wherever it's needed. Once named, "Legion" is revealed to be a composite of the many demons possessing the man.

We learn that no human power can control the demons; not chains, not shackles, not guards. Yet when Jesus confronts "Legion," the demons beg for leniency. They fear torture (what "Legion" is known for) and they fear the Abyss, the nothingness of annihilation. Yes, now the demons' **own** fears are revealed. Exposed and vulnerable now, they bargain and strike a deal.

They plead to be sent into a herd of pigs. This is no accident either. As we know, swine are unclean for Jews. Pagans and Romans ate pork because they have nothing to do with God's covenant with his people, Israel. (By the way, the demons have already shown disdain for God's way by residing among the tombs – the dead are unclean for Jews, too.)

After being cast into the herd of pigs, they somehow run off a cliff and into a lake, killing the pigs and the demons with them. The problem is that there is no lake and there are no cliffs, **none** in Gerasa – a lake and any cliffs are over 30 miles away – and in an alternative reading, the location is Gadara which is six miles from a lake and there are no cliffs there either. This should make it very clear that this is a **symbolic** rendering of the story, if you hadn't gotten enough clues already.

This deal sure seems like jumping off a cliff into the deep of a lake is awfully close to experiencing the great deep itself, the Abyss. The reason is: Yes, Jesus tricks them. It wasn't quite the Abyss, but it was the next best thing. That's how Jesus affirms the sovereignty of God and faith in God over that which is fearful, which seems threatening, powerful, oppressive, menacing, etc. This is a clear lesson in the power of faith in God and in Jesus.

As the report went about, people came to see this man, now in right mind, fully clothed, very normal. The peoples' response was ... **overwhelming fear**. If the demons were intimidating, if "Legion" inspired fear and dread, then Jesus who commanded the demonic powers and destroyed them must be feared **even more than** "Legion." While God's Kingdom is shown to be uniquely sovereign, overpowering even the Roman Empire, the people show no awareness that the rule of the Kingdom of God is based on justice, equity, and peace.

As Jesus departs, the healed man begs to continue the journey with Jesus. Instead, the Lord sends him home with a mission to tell how much God had done for him. The man's witness will be to the authority, the grace, and the healing power of Jesus and his Father God.

That's what the story is truly all about. It is not about healing a **naked nut job** who terrorizes a cemetery. It is about the power of God for the faithful, overcoming even the world's greatest power.

And the question remains for the faithful of every era, *What are you doing here?* Are you doing God's work? Is the Kingdom being advanced by your work in ministry? Is the Lord's witness to justice, peace, and new life being achieved through your efforts, however small or insignificant you may regard them, or how ever successful or failed you may think they are?

By asking the question of ourselves, *What are you doing here?* we invite an opening to new knowledge and awareness of how God would use us at this stage in our lives.