



# ***The Westminster Pulpit***

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## ***“God’s Question for You”*** **Sermon on 1 Kings 19:1-15a**

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No question about it, Elijah was a prophet who had no doubt that God is, was, ever will be at work in the world. A powerful, living, active God! No question about it!

It made him bold! You may recall the story about the drought that struck the land. And when there’s a drought, people get panicky. And when people get panicky, all decorum goes out the window. The people of God started shopping around for something other than God! They bought into what was happening at the church of Baal.

Into this “believe anything, do anything” world came Elijah, reminding the people of God that they were people of God. And they are commanded to worship the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. And when you’re ALL in – all your heart, all your mind, all your soul – you have no room for the doubts and demons of the day.

Now that’s good rhetoric, but when life dries up, people don’t easily move to faith. People need proof.

So, Elijah provided the proof. Leaving no question!

You remember that on Mount Carmel, he challenged the 450 prophets of Baal. Great story. It was a contest to determine who’s in charge. The god’s of Baal, or the maker of the heavens and the earth. “You all build an altar and place an offering on it. I’ll do the same.”

Elijah said, “Here are the rules! You call upon your god to consume the sacrifice, and I’ll call upon mine. You first.” The prophets of Baal cried and pleaded. Elijah gave them a little trash talk: “What’s the matter, your god asleep?” “Maybe he’s gone to the restroom!” They cried out. He taunted. Nothing. When it was Elijah’s turn, he said, “Why don’t we make this difficult? Pour some water on the altar I made. Go ahead. Pour out some more! Soak it really

good.” He called upon God. Crack! Fire from heaven consumed his offering. No doubt about it! There is only one God in this world!

The contest victory wasn’t enough! Elijah chased the prophets of Baal down the mountain and into a ravine. There, he killed them. A lot of people latch onto killing as a way to solve the problems of the world. Elijah was one of them. Maybe that’s why on the night of his arrest, Jesus took the cup away from Elijah and said, “This is my blood shed for you.” Mercy. Forgiveness, peace.

Fire from heaven... but there was still a drought. Elijah climbed up a mountain and prayed. He told his servant to go out and look toward the sea. “What do you see?” “Nothing.” “Oh, go back and look. What do you see?” “Nothing.” “Oh, go back and look again. What do you see?” “Nothing.” This happened seven times, and then, finally, there, on the horizon, was a cloud. It was no bigger than a human hand. Elijah said, “Go tell the king there’s going to be a real gully-washer.” Sure enough! He just believed God comes through! No question about it!

Except there’s a question about it. In our scripture today, we find him afraid. Afraid for his life. No question about it!

#### *1 Kings 19:1-15a*

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup>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.’ <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.’ <sup>5</sup>Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Get up and eat.’ <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.’ <sup>8</sup>He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. <sup>9</sup>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?’ <sup>10</sup>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.’

<sup>11</sup> 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; <sup>12</sup>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?’ He answered,

<sup>14</sup>‘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.’ <sup>15</sup>Then the Lord said to him, ‘Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

There’s a question about it. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” “What are you doing here?” If I went searching for God, I wouldn’t want those words to be my greeting. I don’t need God giving me questions. I need answers.

I have questions! Why is there evil? Why do the innocents suffer? Why don’t you do something to stop this insanity? Why don’t you show up and show the folks who’s boss?

“What are you doing here?”

I remember in school, getting out of class to go to the bathroom, to get a drink of water, to look at the bulletin board. Only to hear the voice of the principal ask, “What are you doing here?” Now, the principal knew the answer. I knew he knew the answer. The only response was for me to head back to the classroom.

I guess what I’m saying is, if you’re taking sermon notes, here’s something to write down: every question God asks is always rhetorical. Lord knows the answer.

But this is Elijah! He doesn’t want to hear, “What are you doing here?” That’s not the greeting! No one wants that!

I remember a man who joined the church many years after visiting it. You see, the first time he came to church, he was greeted with the words for an acquaintance, “What are you doing here?” It may have been an innocent question! But, the man took the question to say, “You don’t belong here.” It took him years to come back here.

You come to the Holy for communion, affirmation, confirmation, reformation.

Even Elijah, this man who was battling a thousand in demonstrating the power of God. Fire and rain! Needed to be perked up. Queen Jezebel somehow knocked the fire and the wind and the rock and roll out of his soul.

She was able to plant a tiny seed of doubt! And it took root. He needed God! He went looking for God! So, he got out his map and headed to Beersheba, which isn’t just a place in the desert. It’s the place of Jacob’s dream. The place where Jacob made a rock his pillow and, in the night, saw angels ascending and descending a ladder, is the place of Jacob’s blessing.

I think Elijah was looking for a blessing. Elijah, the burned-out prophet, settled under a broom tree and fell asleep. And wouldn’t you know it, the place of angels had an angel who nudged him. “Wake up and eat. You need to keep going.” Jacob ate and drank, then went back to sleep. Jacob is kicked by an angel, says the Hebrew. Get up and eat. There are no answers here. You’re on a journey, boy.

And so, Elijah heads to the holy mountain of Moses. You know the mountain the people of God would never go up, because the top was in the clouds, lightning, and thunder, and they were too scared. But Elijah had his question. Elijah needed answers. And sure enough, he got

the show. The fire, but God wasn't in the fire. The earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake. The wind, but God wasn't in the wind. And then nothing, I like the King James, "A still small voice." The sound of powder, like the sound dandelion seeds make when they fall to the ground. Snowflakes. Nothing at all.

And in that nothingness, Elijah hears, "What are you doing here?" Lord knows it's a rhetorical question. It's an existential question. What on earth are you doing here? When you don't know the answer, that's a terrible day.

I recall a time when I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. What I thought wasn't it. News reporting wasn't it. I remember being on my knees as Beth went to work...and praying to God for answers. It took God a while to convince me of what I'm doing here.

And now after 30 years of ministry, I think I hear that still small voice that says, "What are you doing here?"

I hear it when I'm caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. I hear it when I'm scared. I hear it when I know the truth and don't want the truth. I hear it when I'm in a world of fear and shaking in my shoes. I hear it when I know better, but I don't feel better.

But God asks the question! "What are you doing here?" To remind us of the power of God! It's shaped like a communion cup... the cup that was once Elijah's, where power isn't found in killing your enemy! Power is found in forgiving them.

That's why you're here!

God asks the question, "What are you doing here, making your life about hate?"

What are you doing here, creating divisions?

What are you doing here? You need to be outraged by the injustice...giving your life for justice.

What are you doing here? Love the Lord your God with ALL your heart and mind... and your neighbor.

There's no room for anything else.

Elijah went back to work. I don't know if he was any less scared. He may have even had his doubts, but he went back to work. Living out the Word!

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