

What Are You Doing Here Elijah?

By Dr. Dave Neale

The title of the message today is what God says to Elijah who has fled some rather fraught circumstances to the wilderness. He says it not once, but twice, ***‘What are you doing here Elijah?’***

The theme of our passage today is the majesty of God contrasted with the finite and humble experiences of living in this world. In our story today God is transcendent, yet caring. We are finite, we grow tired, discouraged and hungry; but God bids us carry on in life.

We have said in recent weeks that the Creed is the bone structure of our faith, that every body needs bones. And that if the bone structure is sound then you can build muscle around that structure and become healthy. By way of analogy, so it is with the Creed and our life of faith. It is the bone structure.

We have said that the Creed is derived from the entire Bible. It is a highly succinct expression of its central elements, from a Christian perspective.

The lens of the Creed can also be flipped and provide a way to read the Bible.

So this morning, along the way of enjoying this impactful Hebrew Bible story, we will also ask:

- ‘Where is God the Maker of heaven and earth to be found?’
- ‘Is there sonship here?’
- ‘Is the Holy Spirit present?’
- ‘And what does it mean for living in the world, that is to say, for the church?’

So often, opening a biblical passage and reading feels like being thrown in the deep end of a swimming pool. Suddenly you find yourself in an unnatural environment, overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of it all.

Think how stabilizing this lens of the Creed to our reading strategy of the Bible. The Creed keeps us focussed on what is central in our faith and gives us a balanced place from which to begin our reading.

Background

In our narrative this morning we find the great prophet Elijah as he reels from the threat against his life from the wicked Jezebel.

1 Kings 17-19 and it is the story of the prophet Elijah and King Ahab of Israel. Ahab was a bad king (Israel, the northern kingdom, Judah was the southern kingdom). It was said of him that he ***...did more to provoke the anger of the Lord than all the kings of Israel who were before him*** (1 Kings 16:33).

Some of you may remember from Sunday School that his wife Jezebel was a Baal worshipper who led Ahab and Israel astray, worshipping the Baal, the chief Phoenician god of rain.

A drought occurs during that time and the prophet of Yahweh calls for contest between the 450 prophets of Baal (and another 400 prophets of Asherah! 1 Kings 18:17ff) to see who can call down fire from heaven, burn up some oxen for sacrifice, and end the drought.

Elijah is a stand in for Yahweh in this narrative? The name “Elijah” is a shortened form of Yahweh. Elijah means “God” and jah is that first half of Yahweh. Obidiah says when he meets Elijah, ***Is it you,***

my lord Elijah? (1 Kings 18:7). Elijah tells Obadiah, 'tell Ahab **Elijah is here.**' So the contest is set up between the One and the many. Between the God Almighty and the hordes of the Baals.

You know how the story of the contest goes I'm sure. The prophets of Baal cry out, **O Baal, answer us!** No answer. **They limped around the altar they had made!** No answer. Elijah jokes, maybe Baal is out of town or taking a nap (1 Kings 18:27).

The prophets practiced a dance in which they "limp" around the altar, bending one knee with each step, just like doing your lunges at the gym.

Elijah addresses Ahab and these 450 prophets: **How long will you go limping with two different opinions: If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him!** (1 Kings 18:21).

But there is also quite a stinging rebuke here about people who have divided loyalties. As someone said, if you have two clocks you never know what time it is.

This reminds us of what we learned in our study of the Creed... You have to choose in life.¹

*What I would like to say is that you have to choose in life. This is the most wonderful thing about being a human being and the most challenging thing about the moral and spiritual life. Life is a series of choices for better or worse. But there is **always** hope to find our way back onto the right path.*

Elijah of course soaks his wood with water, calls down the fire prevailed. The drought ended. And, sorry to say, Elijah has the 450 prophets of Baal killed.

In response to Yahweh's victory and Elijah's killing of her prophets, Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, vows to kill Elijah in the next 24 hours (1 Kings 19:1-2).

Notice the powerful contrasts in the narrative. First there is the theme of God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth:

- There is the omnipotent power of Yahweh, fresh from a victory over the false limping prophets of the false gods. God the One is seen in the power over the many so-called gods.
- There is the majesty of God compared to the weakness of the human heart of Elijah. The great prophet of God, who has just seen more signs and wonders than any one of us will ever see, still gets into a funk because things have not gone his way. What does that tell you about the fragility of the human heart? Shoulders sagging, hungry and sleepless, he, dare I say, limps off into the wilderness and plunks down under a broom tree (remember how Jonah did the same thing?).² In spite of all that he has seen, Elijah is the one who is limping between two opinions, unsure of his loyalties, unsure about the personal cost of being the great prophet of God: **"It is enough; now, Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my ancestors"** (1 Kings 4b).
- There is the contrast of God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, revealed on a mountain top where the wind and fire and the silence of God whirl; and the pathetic man who hides in a rock, afraid to behold the Presence.

Second, there is sonship here.

While Elijah is mightily used of God, he is also just a man; and God's only son at this time in history, in a way. He is God's sole remaining loyal servant in Israel, the only one to stand in the gap for the

One. I may be stretching the hermeneutical point a bit (no one thinks this is a messianic text), but I do see a resonance of God's parental love at the least, and love of son at the most.

This sonship is expressed toward Elijah in the tender care and intimacy of The One.

Third, there is Holy Spirit here. And I see it in the Holy Spirit's ministry to the sad prophet. There is such tender care and intimacy.

Take away my life... says Elijah, and the "angel" (מלאך, *malak*, a "messenger", LXX, τις "someone" v 5) says here is something to eat (19:5).

I know around my house when one or the other gets rather grumpy, the first thought is, 'maybe we should eat?'

He ate and drank and lay down again (19:6b). 'It is late,' says the messenger, 'Why don't you get some sleep? We'll have another go at things tomorrow.'

Again the angel touched him in his sleep and said, **Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you** (19:7). Do you see how it is repeated for emphasis? A Hebrew Bible convention.

Notice the intimate care of our Saviour when He taught us to pray, 'say **Give us this day our daily bread.**'

And then finally there is the application to our lives (the church). See what God said to our discouraged sage.

Then the word of the Lord came to him saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:10b).

Emphasize each word to exegete the meaning. Which one is it?

After God speaks, Elijah recites his grievances. 'I have been faithful.... life isn't fair.... why has this happened to me?... I deserve better' (19:10). I think we all know the drill because we have all done it.³

I have known people who live life aggrieved, as a pattern of life. It is very painful to see it. Let us not limp along in self-pity my friends. It doth not become us as children of God.

Get up Elijah and go out and stand on the mountain **...and after the wind and earthquake, and after an earthquake a fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence** (19:12).

I may have told you this story but I always think of it when I'm in this part of the story. Elijah travels **forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God** (19:8). When we had travelled to St Catherine's Monastery at Horeb, we went on a day outing to the surrounding desert. After lunch our guide bade us all be quiet and a silence so profound came upon us. No wind, no insects, no rustling vegetation, for there was none. It was so silent that I could almost imagine hearing the voice of God.

And again... **Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here Elijah?"** (19:13).

God's answer is this. **Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram** (19:15).

That's it. Just like in Job chapters 40 and following. No answer except that ought the created question the Creator? Get up and get on with the gift of life. And so you see... that we are bid by God to get on with life in faith. It has always been thus. And it will always be thus.

The great chapter of faith found in Hebrews 11 rings so true for us. By faith Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, the people of Israel, to say nothing of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, and above all Jesus.

Looking to Jesus, the pioneer of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat the right of the throne of God.

By faith you have been saved through grace, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works so that no one may boast.

While we might imagine that there would be comfort to be found in the answer to the question ‘why?’, there is in fact none on offer from God. Because there isn’t enough why to go around to be honest. There is never enough to make life easy. God doesn’t ever tell us why.

By faith you have been saved through grace...

Thanks be to God. Amen

*It points to the reality that, as we search for meaning in this secular age, we find an “explosion of different options,” made fragile “competing options” for life, and... “we find ourselves in perpetual unease.”¹ (May 1, 2022 *We Need the Creed*)*

² ***O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live,*** Jonah 4:3

³ The texts of the week are all expressions of grievance. But also notice the similarity to the long complaint of Job and God’s ultimate answer, ‘Who are you to question God?’ See Job 40:1 and following.

Psalm 42:5, ***Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?***

Psalm 42:9, ***“Why have you forgotten me: Why must I walk about mournfully because my enemy oppresses me?”***