



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

What are you doing here?

1 Kings 19:1–15a

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WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

Today, we are going to have a *question of the day*:
What are you doing here?!

Think about this question for a moment. As you sit in this place at this time.

- What are you doing HERE? What is it about this place? This building, this congregation, this group of people, these friends, family.
- What is it about you that has led you here? We all have a backstory that leads us to where we are. What are YOU doing here?
- And what are we about? WHAT are we DOING here? What drives us forward? What moves us?

I want to probe those questions today through the story of Elijah, who was asked the very same by the voice of the Lord in today's scripture.

ELIJAH'S BACKSTORY

Let's start with that question about backstory. What are YOU doing here? We have an amazing story about Elijah encountering God for our scripture. But before we get to that, it's important to know Elijah's backstory. We all have one—those events, those people, those experiences that have shaped who we are today. Elijah's goes like this:

King Ahab (one of *the* kings in the book of Kings) is ruling Israel and doing his best to strengthen economic and political ties with the surrounding nations. Of course, one of the best ways to do this is to marry the daughter of a neighboring King. So Ahab marries Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king, in order to collect more power and stabilize foreign relations. Just think of it like when Karin and I got married—I was from Phoenix and she was from Lebanon County. We brought together the Phoenicians and the Lebanese. Pretty much just like that. (You had no idea we had such ancient Middle Eastern roots did you?)

2 *Unlike* our wedding though, the new queen brought with her an entirely different religion and god [Baal Melqart (BAY-el MEL-quart)]. Actually, this in itself was not all that radical—King Solomon’s wives did the same. [In fact, Solomon would even build a temple to his new brides’ deities as a sort of wedding gift.] But Jezebel wanted to go a bit further—she sought to make the worship of her god official, which sparked a holy war.

Elijah, prophet of *the* God, Yahweh, is horrified that the nation of Israel would accept another god, and demands King Ahab return to Yahweh. But Ahab, sticks with his new bride. Famine strikes the land, Elijah is branded an enemy of the state.

That’s when Ahab and Elijah agree to a duel of sorts. If Elijah can get Yahweh to spontaneously light a sacrifice, he wins. However, if the prophets of Baal (all 450 of them) can do the same, they win. Predictably, Elijah’s sacrifice is sparked, Baal’s fails and to the victor go the spoils; the spoils in this case the privilege of execution. Elijah promptly kills them all. Brutal. And this is where our scripture for today picks up.

1 KINGS 19:1–15A

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 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.” 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. 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.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Elijah’s triumph quickly turns to terror as Jezebel, hearing what happened to her prophets, tells Elijah “That’s nothing compared to what I’m going to do to you.” So Elijah heads for the wilderness.

It's here that Elijah, seeing no future for himself or his people, totally breaks down and asks God to end his life. We can imagine that he is exhausted, scared, and depressed as he sits down under a broom tree and begs God to take his life.

What are YOU doing here? We all have a backstory. And sometimes it's been that bad, when all we want to do is lay down and fade away. Often it's of our own doing—we've made poor choices and are living with the consequences. Some other times, we just get the short end of the stick. Maybe we made all of the right moves and things still didn't work out. No matter how it happens, there are times when we see no way forward. Meaning is drained from life. *What am I doing here?* And we just want to sit down under a broom tree and go to sleep. Anyone ever felt that way besides me?

I got to wondering why a broom tree? You know, when we read scripture and we see something very specific, it's often a clue. Broom trees were used for kindling and firewood. Slow-burning broom tree embers were sometimes buried under a few inches of sand or soil to make a traveler's warm bed, then start the morning fire to bake the day's bread. **The broom tree was a place of renewal.** And now the question shifts...

What are you doing HERE? I'm asking you that this morning. Why are you here? Is it a place of renewal? Is it your broom tree?

Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 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. 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." 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. 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?" He answered, "I have been very zealous

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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." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

[The time for wallowing has ended. Time to get up and get moving.] *And the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

Elijah's response is interesting as he launches into a defense/complaint. *God I did what was right, even when the rest of the nation was turning away from you. And what do I get in return? I'm a refugee...a wanted man! They want to kill me!*

And this voice of the Lord's response to Elijah's response doesn't give any answers or reassurance. But rather, *Go, listen for God.*

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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

God through a "still small voice," that again asks, "What are you doing here?"

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, "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."

And I really wonder what emphasis was on which word in "What are you doing here?"

What are YOU doing here? Maybe God was expecting someone else?

What are you DOING here? Sitting around complaining?

What are you doing HERE? There's things that need to be done!

While it could have been any of those, it was most likely the last, as Elijah gets his marching orders.

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. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

This sermon sprang out of conversations that we've been having as a pastoral, Church Board to some degree. We're always asking this question. What are we doing here?

I don't know about you, but when I hear that phrase, how it's said makes all the difference in the world. Is it:

WHAT are you DOING here? Or is it more like:

What are YOU doing here? Or even:

What are you doing HERE?

How we ask that question is important. For Elijah. And for us.

ENDING.

We have a very unique opportunity. I wonder what would happen if we really believed that?

Story...Meeting with David Steele. Elizabethtown is a leader in the denomination.

Story...I don't know what I would do without this church

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Given the conversations we are engaged in as we consider a significant building project it is a worthy question in it's multiple forms.

I wondered where there might be parallels between that "still small voice" speaking to Elijah and to us in our lives, asking us in all of our lives, our situations and circumstances, our predicaments and postures...

→WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

For us, emphasis on the *what* and the *doing* probably makes us feel at ease. We know that **What we do matters**, to other people and the world around us, and is vital to how we articulate our faith.

I recently corresponded with a person who grew up in this congregation, and who now works and lives in Latin America, committing his life to improving the lives of others. He wrote how formative it was for him in the 80s when he met the Salvadoran refugees that this congregation sheltered as part of the sanctuary movement. He met, face-to-face those affected by real world issues and saw how the church can respond in faithfulness with peace and justice. Yes, we know that what we do matters to the world around us.

We also know that it matters to us as a congregation. The LORD tells Elijah to go back and anoint the new political and religious leaders. That reminded me of an interesting article that asked congregations the question, "Are We Making a Place for the Next Generation?" The article noted how congregations often lament the number of young adults in church. While previous generations lived on a steady diet of the societal notion that "good people go to church," (Those days are gone, and most of us probably don't believe that anyway) the article pointed out that young adults—my generation—do not feel compelled to attend church just because it's the "right" thing to do. And many times they also do not feel welcomed in worship because they are single or divorced or gay or lesbian, or have tattoos and piercings. Unfortunately, sometimes the feel people get when they visit a church is *What are you doing here?*

Do we equally value the single person as much as those married with kids?

Questions like this, as well as questions like *How are we making a place for the next generation?* And *How can we continue to exemplify and encourage faithful living to all people?* These are the questions that define who we are as followers of Jesus.

Asking, *What we are doing here* also has a spiritual component. We're a doing people for the most part. We do service really well. But how do we do spirituality? How do we hear God moving in our lives, directing us, guiding us, encouraging us? Just a reminder that there are things we can DO about that: thinking, praying, centering, meditating are all very legitimate things to do as we strive to be followers of Jesus.

The second way our question of the day might be asked is...

→WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

Are you here because it has been a life-giving place of renewal? A broom tree to sit under, seek shelter from the harsh sun, a warm bed on a cold night, a place of nourishment and refreshment?

This place is unique. Where else can you find a congregation that...see list

The story is told of a man who was shipwrecked and lived most of his life alone on a deserted island on which no other human had ever set foot. After many years of isolation, a ship came his way and a rescue party was sent ashore. He welcomed them of course, and then showed them around a bit. Pointing to a small log cabin, he said, "This is my house. I built it with my own two hands." Then he showed them a second building built much the same as the first. "This is my church," he said. "I built it with my own two hands." Then one of the rescuers noticed a third building with the very same design and workmanship as the first two asked what that building was. To which the man replied, "Oh, that's the Church I used to go to."

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Point being we have a choice. We come to church and participate, maybe even chip in a little or devote much of our lives to the institution of church, but we rarely stop to examine why. Most of us don't buy the argument that our very salvation lies in whether or not we're making it to worship 48–52 times a year, though many grew up with that notion. What are we doing here? Why this place? Why these four walls? Answer this question.

And the last time you have to stomach the question of the day...

→WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

It's worth noting that Elijah's travels are in effect the reverse Israel's **journey** through the wilderness to the Promised Land. When he gets **scared** he runs. And not only is he scared, but there's even a little self-pity and self-righteousness mixed in for good measure: "I'm the only true believer left. Everyone has forsaken me."

Yet even in that fear, and self-pity and loneliness God **provides** for him with the bread and water (think manna from heaven) even after he has given up. Going so far as to **encourage** him to eat when he doesn't respond immediately. When we get scared, or stuck in self-righteousness, do we—like Elijah reversal of the journey of the Israelites—reverse the progress we've made with God?

After his nourishment Elijah gets the question of the day: "What are you doing here?" Way out here?! What good are you out here? God sends Elijah on his way back with work to do, and reminds him that he is not in this alone. Elijah's self-pity and self-righteousness are brought into light.

Interesting that the still small voice called on Elijah to do something that would make a lot of political and religious noise. Revolutionary in fact. Calling on him to anoint a new king of Israel, a new king of Damascus and a new prophet to take his very place. Talk about regime change! We are reminded that each person makes a difference; for the sake of themselves and the sake of others. I wonder how each of us hear our call?

