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Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH
June 22, 2025

In our first reading, we find the prophet Elijah - who has been a bold, physically strong, confident prophet, running away in a crisis of fear and frustration, feeling exhausted and depressed. He eventually winds up on Mt. Horeb at the foot of a cave, where we are told he hears from God in the form of a question.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

This question not only reaches into the depths of Elijah's being and life and purpose, but to ours as well. The question points us to the greater possibilities of what we are created to be in God. It invites us to know the freedom we have to inhabit that.

I'd like to reflect together about this.

First, let's think about the context of the story we heard today. Like many Old Testament stories, the story of Elijah can feel challenging to relate to, partly because these stories are “dressed,” so to speak, in thick layers of ancient world views and literary styles that are SO different from ours.

It's easy to get lost in those layers and feel disconnected due to things like the hyperbole of exaggerated statements and imagery, or the patriarchal and often violent world views. These ancient scriptures were originally an oral tradition and then written down 3 or 4,000 years ago. Seems long ago and far away. And they were written down by many different authors, in varied times and places. They are not just one continuous story but include many types of literature like ancient story telling styles, legal documents, songs, poetry, speeches, prayers, wisdom literature, apocalyptic literature, and cross referencing among the many books. It's complex and distant from here, from our world.

But, beneath these outer coverings are stories of ancestors of a tradition which Christianity arose from, of human beings as they were striving to understand and grow in relationship with God, with the greater wisdom and mystery of life that we are all created from and are part of.

We can learn to shine a probing light through the gauze of the ancient overlay where we will see that the writings are threaded with the inspiration of Spirit, with profound insight. Despite the vast differences in time and culture, the heart of these sacred texts point us to underlying meaning that is universal and timeless, and therefore, meaningful to us.

In other words, stripped down to the essence, Elijah's story is relatable.

For one thing, as it is stated in Chapter 5 of the New Testament letter of James, “Elijah was a human being, even as we are.”

Elijah was just living a human life, trying to do his best, as we are.

And he was struggling, as we often are. His “answer” to the question, “Why are you here, Elijah?” is an explosive tirade.

“I’ve tried to do everything I’m supposed to do! Things aren’t changing, I can’t make things change! The whole country is acting against what is right! My life is in danger, and I’m all alone here! I can’t take it any more!”

Most if not all of us will experience Elijah’s feelings of despair, about how life is going despite our best efforts, or feeling all alone, or feeling that people and circumstances are working against us. It can be true in our intimate lives inside, and in our struggles with the world around us, especially in times such as these. It seems like there is a new heartbreak every day.

Elijah represents the difficulty of striving to live deeply in the Truth, of listening for God’s guidance and wondering if it will be there, of being a political dissenter striving to bring about change, and of feeling inadequate to the tasks that face him.

Elijah’s despair also reflects that he has lost touch with the fact that God is with him, that he is part of something bigger than himself.

It’s *not* all up to him. We forget that too, all the time. We feel the weight of our life to be all on our shoulders. We forget that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves, something loving unfurling from the core of us. We often forget to pray, to be still, to listen, to notice all the ways we are offered help and blessings, to see all the sources through which support can come.

Which calls us back to the question.

What are you doing here?

What are *we* doing here in this life? How are we using our lives? What are we focusing on?

Poet Mary Oliver put the question in a now very famous way:

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

With your one wild and precious life?

A Buddhist poem about living the highest form of life, one dedicated to compassion for all beings, says:

This precious human life, so hard to find,

offers the ultimate goal for living beings.

If we do not strive to accomplish this goal now,
how will such a precious opportunity arise again?

What are we doing here?

We can ask the question about our inner lives or our personal lives with family and friends and work. We could ask the question about our life here at St. Paul’s as a faith community, a community with many resources to offer including love, compassion, energy, financial resources, faith, care. We can ask the question about our lives as members of a human family in this time we are living in, as followers of Christ who are committed to serve justice and love when injustice and hate are on the rise in heartbreaking ways, such as, just to give one example, the demonization of immigrants who are being

arrested and denied basic due process, families are living in deep traumatizing fear, petrified that at any moment they could be split up in terrifying ways.

What are we doing here?

The question in all these contexts might be asked in terms of our possibilities and opportunities.

What are we capable of, given that each one of us has unique gifts and resources? What are we capable of given the amazing divine powers that are bestowed upon each of us as part of our creation – things like conscious awareness, the capacity to sense God’s presence and wisdom and engage with it personally, the capacity to give and receive love endlessly, gifts like imagination, creative and advanced thinking, compassion, free will.

Recently I heard someone say that the saddest thing in life is a lost opportunity - and realizing it too late.

Despite his sense of isolation and despair, Elijah was sustained by God in the desert, nourished and guided, given what he needed. His experience showed us that God speaks in many ways, not just in ways we expect. God did not appear to him in the great wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence, in the still small voice, in a whisper. Biblical commentator John Gray said that this story presents “the revelation of God in an intelligible communication rather than in the spectacular phenomena. It marks an advance in humanity’s conception of God as personally accessible and intelligible to us within the framework of human experience.”

God’s wisdom is personally accessible and intelligible to us. We have the freedom and power to choose to be open and available to it, to listen for it. We have been given great gifts and resources with which to engage with it, to make a difference to others and to the world. Every bit helps.

What are we doing here?

What will we choose?