

## What Are You Doing Here?

1 Kings 19:9-18  
Richard C. Allen  
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South Glastonbury  
Connecticut

Elijah is on the run. He has been preaching in the capitol city and the king's wife has not been thrilled with the content of his sermons! Elijah has been brutally honest about the injustices he has perceived at the hand of people in high places. God had sent him to expose Ahab and Jezebel's cruelty and deception, their idolatry and their twisted understanding of faith, their abuse of power. Elijah's preaching has hit the nail on the head, and now it is HIS head Jezebel seeks.

There have been death threats, so Elijah is on the run. By the time we catch up with him in 1 Kings 19, he is hiding out in a cave, lying low, waiting for the heat to disperse. The angel of God visits Elijah there in the cave and asks him, point blank, 'What are you doing here?' The implication is: I sent you on a sacred mission, so what are you doing in a cave...preaching to bats? Yes, the mission is a dangerous one. It has its risks. But God expects Elijah to follow through. A prophet's work is always dangerous. When you name the injustices you see all around, you are bound to stir up some opposition.

Last week in Mzuzu, the northern capitol of Malawi, a number of journalists were arrested and some were killed for their newspaper articles drawing attention to government corruption. These journalists, both men and women, were not hiding out in a cave; they were doing their jobs, speaking truth to power. They are modern day Elijahs.

This question ‘what are you doing here?’ keeps me up at night. I hope it keeps all of us up at night, from time to time. What are we doing here? What is our mission? What is our purpose? What is God calling us to be or to do? Surely, we are not to spend all our time in the safety of a cave, away from Jezebel and her army of intimidators. Surely God has something sacred in mind for each of us, for all of us.

As I survey the landscape of South Church, I see God is calling us to raise up compassionate children; giving children eyes to see the hunger of the world, hearts to feel the pain of the world, and minds to imagine justice in the world. It has been said ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. I would say it takes a church family to raise a child. It takes adults who are willing to speak truth to power; it takes youth who are willing to translate words of faith into deeds of faith. It takes parents and grandparents who are willing to tie on an apron and say to children, ‘let’s go make supper for the people who live at Peter’s Retreat. They are sick and can not cook for themselves.’ It takes a whole church to model for a child what it means to be the kind of neighbor Jesus had in mind when, in the familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan, he told the Jezebels of his day, ‘the good neighbor is the one who shows compassion; go and do likewise.’

What are you doing here? When asked that question, Elijah immediately grew defensive. He replied to the angel saying in effect, ‘Are you kidding? This prophet work is hard work! It nearly got me killed!’ Well, this parenting work is hard work, too. It never ends. It requires all we’ve got! It keeps us up at night! Yet, there is this expectation from God that we’ll follow through no matter what the cost. At my lowest moment in my parenting years, I had retreated to Elijah’s cave. In modern terms, that’s the town transfer station. I would go there when things got discouraging. That’s where I met the angel.

After telling him how bad things were in the parenting realm, he said to me, ‘what are you doing **here**? You have to hang in **there**.’

To be a modern day Elijah is to be called out of the cave and back to the sacred tasks God has called us to undertake, no matter how challenging they may be.

As I survey the landscape here at South Church, I see God is calling us into the city. I say that because, like Elijah, I usually discern God’s calling in my own resistance. Elijah resisted going into the city when the going got tough. I so identify with that. How easy it is to remain right here in South Glastonbury. We have everything we need right here: a coffee shop, a library, a grocery store, a post office, a bakery, a Cotton Hollow, a ball field, a ferry landing, and only three traffic lights! Mighty is the force of resistance to getting involved in the city. My resistance is usually the focus of God’s calling. Just as Elijah responded to the angel with words similar to ‘Are you kidding?’, I find myself saying, Are you kidding? You want me to go into the city? Make breakfast for homeless people? Buy wood from the Open hearth? Volunteer at the Gay Health Collective? Be a teacher in the Summer in the City school enrichment mission? Deliver groceries to the Horace Bushnell Pantry? Mentor children at the Albany Avenue YMCA? Work with Hospice at Hartford Hospital?

South Glastonbury can be like Elijah’s cave, a safe place. So I am thrilled to read through the South Church annual report and see that our mission board has given us a presence on Vine Street and in Frog Hollow and in the North End and on Seymour Street and on Windsor Street and on Retreat Avenue. We have a strong presence in the city. I believe God is calling us to be involved more and more in the wellness of the city, in the wholeness of city dwellers, indeed, in the salvation of the urban centers.

Elijah was ready to abandon the city for the security of cave life, but he couldn't find a hiding place beyond God's reach. The angel found him there in the depths of the cave, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

Finally, as I survey the landscape at South Church, I see God is calling us to a deeper, broader, more caring network among our grieving neighbors. I think of grief as the universal emotion. Somebody is always grieving some loss whether it be the loss of a loved one or the loss of youthfulness or the loss of a relationship or the loss of a job or the loss of an identity or the loss of health. Loss and grief are constant emotions in the human heart. I've often thought a church should have a staff position: minister of grief. But then I remind myself that this is the ministry of all the people, to reach out in comforting ways to anyone who is grieving anything. We have become, to some extent, a grief-denying culture. We have distanced ourselves from the reality of grief, I suppose as a way of sheltering ourselves. The irony is that in protecting ourselves from grief, we are creating a spiritually unhealthy society.

My earliest encounter with grief came in the early 1950's upon the death of Howard Memmott, one of our beloved neighbors on Kimberley Lane. What I remember is my mother taking a loaf of bread out of the oven, instructing me to get into the car, and then watching as my mother delivered the bread to Barbara. I could see it was more than the bread; also delivered was the love of a neighbor lady to a friend. It was a grief shared. I'm sure my mother, with her own six children, could easily have stayed home, taken the road more often traveled, but she chose to enter into that shadow land of grief, taking the road less traveled. It was as if the angel had appeared in our kitchen at 400 Main Street and said, 'Margaret, what are you doing here?' Even as a seven year old, I could see that God calls us to have a loving presence in the midst of grief. To this day, I know of no calling more sacred.

I am hoping we can have conversations on our boards and committees, conversations over coffee, conversations here and there to explore ways to be more and more 'out of the cave' and more and more present in the ministry of grief. Our Board of Christian Service takes the lead on this. The visitation team helps. The healing ministers are involved. The deacons have their part. The clergy know their role. How else can we all participate in the ministry of grief?

The angel's question to Elijah, 'what are you doing here?', is as provocative a theological question as any I know. It is more than a question. It is an invitation to step outside the cave to hear where God may be calling us to minister.

This is how the text was speaking to me this week. As always, I share my reflection with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.