

1 Kings 19:4-8 Bill Uetrich 8.7.24 12 Pentecost

People often think they go to the Bible for answers. Occasionally, that may be true. But I wonder if sometimes we ought not go to the Bible for its questions.

In the verse following what is our first reading for today from First Kings, God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?" He'll ask him the same question a few verses later. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And I suspect that he could have easily asked this question to Elijah in the part of First Kings that we consider today.

Elijah is on the run. He has just singlehandedly killed 450 prophets of Baal with the sword. Queen Jezebel is angry about this, and she is seeking his life. She wants him dead. Elijah heads off to Beersheba, a place that is not under Jezebel's control. And then, he goes into the wilderness, further away from Jezebel, and sits himself under a tree, asking that he might die. "Take my life," he cries out to God. Elijah is in despair. He is ready for his life to come to an end.

An angel then shows up and touches him. "Get up and eat," the angel says. It's as if the angel is saying, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Your little self-pity party needs to come to an end. Get something to eat and get going. And by the way, there's provision for you, Elijah. A cake and some water appear at his head.

Elijah eats the provision and then lays back down again. Despair is a tough thing. Depression is relentless. You just always want to go back to bed. Maybe you can sleep it off. You don't have much energy for much more than sleeping.

And then an angel of the Lord appears to Elijah for yet another time, touching and saying: "What are you doing here, Elijah? Get up and eat. Or you are not going to be able to handle the journey ahead."

God assumes that Elijah has a journey ahead of him. Elijah probably thinks that he's had enough. But God has expectations for Elijah. He has work for him to do. Elijah, you can't stay sleeping. You can't stay hidden. It's tempting, I know. It's understandable. You've been through a lot, and nobody fully knows what you have been through. So, it's understandable why you might want to withdraw. We get why you want to throw in the towel. Your depression, your despair, and maybe your anxiety are all comprehensible. But, what are you doing here, Elijah?

I find this question remarkably compelling, for you, for me, for us together. I think it's clear that the angel believes that there is much more to Elijah's story, that where he is now is not where God intends him to stop. The story is not over. Your story is not over. So what are you doing here? You got work to do. You need to get moving. I've got plans for you.

Oh, I know. You are young, maybe you think too young really to make much of a difference. I know. You are retired. You are old. You are decrepit. You are crabby. Nobody knows the trouble you've seen. Nobody knows the problems you've faced, the disappointments you have experienced, the stupid things you have done, the sin you have committed and has been committed against you. But it ain't over. The story is not over. Get up and get going. And there is provision for the journey you will be on. And you won't do it alone. The angels in the form of your friends may show up with a casserole dish or might invite you to go out to eat or to come over to their home for dinner. Receive the dish. Accept the invitation. You don't have to do the journey alone.

This congregation and its history of 160 years is a sign that we don't take this journey alone and that the journey is often done in the midst of difficult situations. Our ministry started during the Civil

War of our country. The Civil War could easily have been a reason to climb into the sack and cover our heads. But no, there was work to do, a gospel to proclaim, a community to build, the bread of life to share. So, a group of Norwegian immigrants took some nourishment, and they got up and went. And 160 years later, we rejoice that they got out of bed. We rejoice that when they were asked the question, “What are you doing here?” they responded by moving courageously and boldly into the future.

As I think about our congregation now, I want to ask this question of us and then play with the question. First Lutheran, what are you doing here?

Again, it’s clear from First Kings that we aren’t called to sit still; we aren’t called to stay stuck. There is a whole lot more work to do. There are lots of people to connect to, a lot of hopelessness to address. It’s not time to sit back and rest on our laurels, as significant as those laurels are. The movement with God is always a movement into the future. We’re not going back. We’re moving forward, a reality that suggests that the future may look different from the present and very different from the past. There is a whole lot yet to be revealed. We’re on our way to Mt. Horeb, that is Mt. Sinai, which, yes, will connect us to our past, to Moses and the giving of the law, but what the heroes and traditions of the past will mean for the future, well, that is yet to be revealed. Get up and get moving, nonetheless.

Let me play with the question. What are we doing *here*? In some ways, contrary to what I just said, *here* is a good place. As we move into the future, 160 more years, “here” is quite important. We don’t do our work just at any old place. We do it *here*. Place matters. Geography matters. Context matters. What’s going on in the world right now matters.

While I was riding my bike this past week, I came across a woman, a leader in our community, who said to me, “I really appreciate what you all are doing in the community.” Her words caused me to think about what we are doing and what the vision is that drives our work. And it struck me that what drives me and, I hope, this congregation, is our sense that our ministry is shaped by the *here* and the *now*, where we are and what’s going on locally and globally. We don’t do ministry in general, but we do it in Muskegon, Michigan, on the northside, next to a bike trail, alongside a woods where homeless people set up tents, in a community where music and the other fine arts are treasured, among people who want and need to have their brains stretched, in a city where there are so many exciting things happening. And we do our ministry at a time when injustice reigns, wars are too plentiful, and political polarization is too obvious. We move forward into the future taking very seriously *here* and *now*.

Let me play a little more with the question. *What are we doing here?* What is the content of our work? We know we aren’t called to sit still. We know that we are being prodded to move into the future. But what is the work we are to do? Pay attention to our gospel lesson for today to get a clue. In many ways, the work isn’t our work after all. Jesus in today’s gospel tells us that *he* is “the bread of life.” He is the one who connects us with that which will truly satisfy, will give us eternal life, life with God, not simply in the future, but now.

The work that we are called to do is really the work of God in Jesus. We go forward into the future highlighting the bread of life, focusing not simply on us but on the one who truly is the interesting thing, the one who takes us to the deeper places, the one who will unite those who are separated from each other, the one who will beg

us to practice peace and to seek justice, the one who will show us God.

Every week here, we gather to be shown God, to experience and taste God. We do so as we munch on the bread of Jesus' teaching. And we do so as we munch on what he says is his flesh. Every week we eat real bread and drink real wine, which we say is Jesus. You see, we are convinced that Jesus is the bread of life, the real deal. We believe that as we take him into ourselves we encounter the very life of God, life that is interesting, fascinating, fun, full of joy, connected to that which really matters, saturated with love, grace, and forgiveness. This is what is to shape our work for the next 160 years. Jesus, the bread of life.

Elijah, what are you doing here? Get up; get going. And here is some bread, the bread of life, bread for the journey. Let it fill you. And then, offer it to others. Together we will feast on it for forty days and forty nights, for a real long time, maybe forever. The journey probably isn't going to be easy. But it's going to be good, real good, filled with life, life abundant!