

What are you doing here, Elijah?

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. It wasn't even 200 years after King David had reigned in Jerusalem, and now half of his nation had completely abandoned the Lord for Baal! God's prophets and priests used to be honored and respected, now they were being arrested and killed because of pagan queen Jezebel and spineless gutless king Ahab who does whatever she says.

The heart of the nation was lost to Baal, and Elijah was God's last prophet, but he had a plan! "Your god versus my God." Mount Carmel. Two altars. Whichever god sent fire from the sky was the true god. So, Baal's prophets, 450 of them, tried their best. They danced around the altar and slit their wrists to get Baal's attention- but no fire. Then Elijah drenched his altar with water, prayed, and God sent fire from heaven until the altar was incinerated. The people were so convinced that they put all 450 prophets of Baal to death and cried, "The Lord- he is God." Ahab saw it, of course he would tell Jezebel and they would get rid of all the Baal worship in the land, or if they didn't the people would rise up and rebel.

But instead of denouncing Baal and Asherah, Jezebel instead sends word to Elijah, swearing by the gods that she will kill him within the day. And no one does a thing. It didn't work! She, Ahab, and everyone knew about the fire! And it didn't work! So, Elijah's had enough of ministry- he lets his servant go. He's had enough of life- he begs God to take it away. And then he goes to Mt. Horeb- also known as Mount Sinai- where the Lord revealed himself to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments. Why? Elijah has one purpose in mind: To see who God really is.

And here, God asks a simple question- the theme for today: **What are you doing here Elijah?**

In this, God has three simple, profound lessons for Elijah, and us.

1. Don't put me in a box, Elijah.

Elijah's plan was simple. When Israel saw or heard about God's fire, they would cast away their idols and dedicate themselves to the Lord. And his plan didn't work. God must not care! God isn't really as loving or as good as he says he is, or he wouldn't have let all of this happen. Elijah says, "I have been very zealous." In other words, "God, my plan was foolproof. I'm doing everything on my part. What's your problem? Don't you care? It's your covenant being broken by your people. It's your altars being torn down. It's your prophets being put to death. And it's your prophet, me, who you have abandoned to be alone in all of this. What are you doing?"

Elijah has committed a grave theological error. He has put God in a box. He has assumed that if God is truly powerful and truly faithful to his promises, then he will function the exact way that I expect him to." We do it too. "If I pray enough and go to church faithfully and live a good enough life, God will show his approval by giving me a happy, healthy, successful life." "If I work hard enough, God will shower me with success, and I'll have enough money to live comfortably." "If I am a good parent, God

will make my children good and obedient, and they will make good decisions.” “When the praises go up, the blessings come down.”

Nonsense.

That is not what the Scriptures say. Of course, your decisions matter, and you should pray and work hard and make wise decisions, but if your assumption is that God is going to always work the way you think he should and that he’s always going to show his love for you the way you think he should, you’ll end up despondent and angry like Elijah. God is saying, “Elijah, don’t put me in a box. Just because things don’t go according to your plan doesn’t mean I don’t have one. And just because I don’t always make sense to you, doesn’t mean I don’t love you. Trust me.”

When God says, “What are you doing here,” he’s also saying,

“I’m listening, Elijah.”

The truth is that each of us has times when God just doesn’t make sense. And if you haven’t, trust me, you will. Each of you has pain. Each of us have lost family members either suddenly or after watching them battle with disease for so long and then lose. Each of us has relationships with our family members, our spouses, our friends that are broken and it takes a real toll. Each of us has real mental health, our anxieties and depressions— they aren’t made up! They’re real! And if you don’t. Just wait! You will. Each of us knows what it’s like to say, “God, what are you doing?” And you know what God says?

“I’m listening.”

God knew why Elijah was there. He’s omniscient! This wasn’t, “Wait, Elijah, what are *you* doing here? You look awful, what happened to you?” No. God knows. He’s not asking for him. He’s giving Elijah a chance to be heard. He wants to listen. And he wants to hear all of it. Listen to these quotes: *“The Almighty has made my life very bitter.” “Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself!” “How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?” “Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died.”* Do you know what they have in common? Those statements all come from the Bible, yes, but all of them are from pious Christians, and we aren’t given the impression that what they say is incorrect or wrong for a Christian to say.

Contrary to what you may have heard, taking your lament to God isn’t a sign of weak faith or doubt, but that it’s real. God wants you to talk to him honestly when you are in pain. He wants to hear about it. He wants to listen, even if it’s not all pretty. When you are in pain, when God doesn’t make sense, don’t run away from him, take it to him. He’s listening.

After God has let Elijah get it off his chest, he teaches Elijah, and us, a lesson:

“Listen to my voice, Elijah.”

The Lord passes by Elijah while he’s in the cave, just like what happened when Moses was on Mount Sinai, and he sends a hurricane wind that splits the rocks and batters the

stone of the mountain. But the Lord was not in the wind. Then an earthquake shook the ground under Elijah. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then a great fire from the sky, just like Mt. Carmel, destroying everything in its path. But God was not in the fire. Then a gentle whisper. And Elijah knows: There he is. What's the point?

I've heard people say things like, "I just wish God would give me a sign, or send me a miracle, then I'd believe." Or "I just feel close to God when I'm in the woods or at the lake." God is certainly able to send shattering storms, splitting earthquakes and raging fires, and you can certainly learn things about God in nature. But if you want to discover God. If you want to know him, truly know him, you have to listen to his voice. If God doesn't make sense to you, if he seems far away and distant, go to the Scriptures. Listen to his voice. That's where he is. It's not in his miracles or his big, impressive signs of power that God is revealed. It's in the Scriptures. That's where he is.

Elijah covers his face, because he a sinner, can't see a holy God and live. And again, God asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah? Elijah vents again. And God responds: "Go anoint Hazael to be king of Aram. Anoint Jehu to be king of Israel. Anoint Elisha to replace you. They will take care of it."

We have no reason to believe that Hazael was a believer in God. He likely wasn't. But God still used him to be a blessing to Elijah and give justice by killing all those who are hurting Israel and hunting Elijah. And those Hazael didn't get, Jehu, the new king of Israel who would replace Ahab and Jezebel would get. And he wasn't a particularly "godly," king either, but God still used him in his plan. And Elisha- God answers Elijah's prayer by giving him a friend, but also hope- "Elijah, my plan will still continue, even after you're gone."

God ends with this, "Oh, and Elijah, you're not alone. I have 7,000 people who haven't worshiped Baal. You aren't alone Elijah." You know what's fascinating? Elijah was a prophet, and he preached God's word all over Israel. These 7000 people who were faithful believers in God weren't brought to faith by the fire of Mt. Carmel, but by the word that Elijah and men like him preached. The sermons that he preached, the counseling sessions, the teaching sessions that Elijah did that seemed so mundane, so ordinary, so unfruitful, that did what not even fire from Heaven could do- turn a heart toward the Lord and give courage not to bow to Baal.

Consider this. Centuries later. The Lord God appears on a different mountain to show his glory and power to three disciples, Peter, James, and John. And on the mountain of transfiguration, who happens to be the two standing beside the Lord? Moses and Elijah. Curious, isn't it? And in that moment, Luke says that they spoke about his death. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Don't you see what I'm doing here Elijah? You thought that I would redeem Israel through great signs of power, but I've come to redeem all people through weakness."

When you are in pain, listen to his voice on the Cross- "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If Jesus loves you enough that he would willingly be slain for you, then that means that whatever he sends to you isn't because he doesn't care, and because he's risen from the dead, we know it's not because he isn't powerful or has somehow forgotten. We may never truly know why he does things that don't make sense. And that's okay. Because we know that his ultimate plan is fulfilled, and that he has all things,

including us, in his hand, and that whatever it is, it won't last forever but will be swallowed up in joy when he takes us home, we can trust him.

One application point I'd like to make is this. Not only will all of us have times where God doesn't make sense, but we all will have friends and family who are in severe pain, for whom God doesn't make sense, and often God sends us to be his voice of comfort to them. So, then, notice how God handles people who are in pain.

First, when Elijah wants God to die, what do we see? God gives Elijah a physical touch. Then he gives him some bread. Then he lets him sleep. Then he lets him get it off his chest. And THEN he teaches him and sends him.

Sometimes, Christians assume that if a person is depressed, the solution is spiritual. "You're feeling depressed? Well have you been praying? Have you been going to Church? Have you meditated on the promises of God?" Don't get me wrong, those are all necessary things, but remember, God made us physical beings too. Sometimes, you don't need a sermon. Sometimes you just need a hug, or a really good meal, or a nap, or to read a really good book. Sometimes you need to just talk about it and get it off your chest and be heard without anyone trying to correct you or give you advice. And you need the Word of God. It's not one or the other. It's both. But do you know what people certainly need when they're in pain?

You. They need their Christian brothers and sisters to comfort them, cry with them, listen to them, encourage them, pray with them, just be with them. And where God's people are, there God is. Not only to say, "what are you doing here, Elijah?" But to say, "I'm here, Elijah. I'm here."

Amen.