

The Journey Continues...

I Kings 19:1-12

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

September 3, 2023

Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

There is so much going on in the story we heard from scripture today. Elijah was called as a prophet, according to the Bible, a true prophet, a prophet on the side of Yahweh. And contrary to how they are sometimes portrayed, being a prophet is not about having magical powers or being able to predict the future. Rather, the job of true prophets is to speak God's truth into the world...most often to speak an unwelcome truth to those in power.

That was certainly the assignment Elijah found himself with. After all those in power included Ahab, the King of Israel, and Jezebel, his wife. And, while few kings in the Hebrew scriptures get applause, Ahab is one who gets some of the highest criticism. Under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, the people were led away from Yahweh as Baal worship was embraced.

In fact, in the chapter just before today's reading you can hear the story of the prophet Elijah challenging the 450 prophets of Baal to a contest. The biblical writer tells us that it was a contest that Elijah and Yahweh won and it resulted in the deaths of the prophets of Baal.

It is that story that leads to today's reading. And it becomes immediately clear that while the contest may have persuaded others that Yahweh is, in fact, the true God, it did not have the same effect on Ahab and Jezebel. Instead, they are out for revenge, seeking Elijah's life.

And so Elijah ran. He was afraid. He was desperate. He was discouraged. So much so that he cried out for God asking that his life be ended.

But rather than ending his life, God sent an angel to feed Elijah. Rather than showing up in major natural events as might have been expected, God showed up for and with Elijah in the sound of sheer silence. Rather than leaving Elijah alone, God showed up for him and called partners to share in his continuing work.

What God didn't do was tell Elijah he was wrong for running or for questioning or for wondering or for feeling discouraged. What God didn't do was offer easy answers. Rather God met him where he was and responded to his needs. God met him where he was and was simply present in the silence with him.

There is so much we could unpack in this story, but one thing we don't want to miss is how God is not discouraged by Elijah's questions, how God is not disappointed in Elijah's lack of courage, but how God keeps showing up.

And this isn't only the case for Elijah. Remember it happens in so many other stories in the Bible as well - Abraham asks questions and challenges God...Moses doubts his calling and asks for what he needs...Job wrestles with all the tragedies of his life and does that with God even when easy answers don't come...the woman looking for her child to be healed challenges Jesus when he refuses to help...Jesus, in the face of his own death, expresses his questions and his fear.

Here is the good news, friends: there is room for questions.

See, too often we don't give our faith room to have questions. But, when we stop and think about it, they are really a natural outgrowth. In fact, our questions and challenges and wrestling with faith can

All contents copyright of the author.

help us to grow and to engage God more fully. After all, the best relationships are built on engagement and growth and discovery, not on blind obedience and strict limitations.

And yet, interestingly enough, much of organized religion is not shaped to nurture questions but rather to reinforce hierarchies of power. Years ago James Fowler did a study on stages of faith and one of his discoveries was just this: “that religious institutions ‘work best’ (p. 164) if the majority of their congregation is in Stage 3”, a stage where “authority is located outside the self, [in other places including] the church leaders” <http://www.exploring-spiritual-development.com/JamesFowlersStages.html>.

But what if we remember when our curiosity feels limited, that it is our organizations, not God, that ask us to stop questioning and wondering and challenging.

What if we were committed to creating communities - families and schools and faith communities and other places in our lives - that were about embracing and journeying through the questions?

What if we created safe places where we could struggle together with our wonderings and our discernments and where new ideas could be welcomed and invited?

What if we imagined a world where questions were part of faith, not contrary to it?

For some of us that is very compelling. For others, it is a little bit scary. And perhaps, for most of us, it is both compelling and also a bit overwhelming.

Because part of what we know is that questions generally cause more questions. And as people who often like to live with the illusion of control, opening ourselves up to questions and more questions can be a bit overwhelming.

But what if our challenge isn't so much to stop asking questions or even to find answers to them, but to become comfortable with questions and to sit with them and to listen to them and see where they might take us.

That is what we've been trying to do over these last several weeks as we have been asking questions together. And, knowing that you all are curious about the questions that have been asked - in fact, I have seen a few of you come up to the boards in the sanctuary to read the questions and I have received a call from someone who worships with us online expressing curiosity - so, we are going to look at a few of them today. Not all of them - after all, these boards here in the sanctuary have so many questions that could provide not minutes, not even hours, but days and lifetimes of conversation for us.

So, this is only the tip of the iceberg, but I do want you to hear some of these.

And, as we start this, let me give one disclaimer. I could read the questions and then proclaim answers to you. But neither would that really do any of us any good in the big picture, it also wouldn't be faithful. Because this journey of faith isn't about me, as a pastor, telling you what to believe. But it is about us making this journey of discovery together.

So, what questions have we been asking?

Well, let's start with these...there is a group of questions that I would put into a category together, not because of their content, but because of the type of questions they are. On our boards you can find questions like: Is heaven real? Was Mary really a virgin? Where did God come from? Was Jesus divine?

All contents copyright of the author.

These are questions that many people have proclaimed firm answers to. In fact, many of these are what some would call, "Simple yes or no questions." But, what if we took a different approach? What if we wondered what other questions might grow from these? What if we wondered why we are curious? What if we wondered why our hoped for answer is important to us? What if we asked questions like, does the answer really matter? If the answer was different than you expect, would your faith be lost?

Then there are a lot of questions up here that might be lifelong companions. Questions like: Why do bad things happen? Why is it difficult to pray? How do I know when I am hearing God's voice? How can I live in ways that make a difference in the world? Where is God in the face of illness and divorce and war and struggle?

These questions are anything but simple. They are very complex. And even the seemingly simple answers that are sometimes given to them are more complex than we sometimes acknowledge. Because these questions get to the heart of who we are and how we feel, what our experiences are and what fears we have.

When I hear these questions, I am not so much filled with answers, but with gratitude for communities of people willing to continue to ask and wonder and try out answers and change their minds. And, in the face of these questions, I would encourage you to find and to create such communities of supportive seekers who can journey together through this life as we continue to walk with God and each other.

And perhaps it is time for me to acknowledge that some of you are unsatisfied with my approach to this. I get it - sometimes we do just want answers. But, perhaps it isn't answers that we are called to seek. Perhaps our journey of faith is meant to be exactly that...a journey. A journey of growth. A journey of wondering. A journey of discovery. A journey upon which the companions with whom we share it are more important than the answers we find.

Now there is one question that was posted here that I will answer. In a child's handwriting you will see the question, "Does God have a favorite?"

I read that question and it brought to mind a scene from the book *The Shack*. In it God, known as Papa, is listening to music by Bruce Cockburn. Mack had come into the room and asked, "Is he your favorite? Bruce, I mean?"

"[Papa] stopped and looked at him. 'Mackenzie, I have no favorites. I am just especially fond of him.'

"'You seem to be especially fond of a lot of people,' Mack observed with a suspicious look. 'Are there any you are *not* especially fond of?'

"[Papa] lifted her head and rolled her eyes as if she were mentally going through the catalog of every being ever created. 'Nope, I haven't been able to find any. Guess that's jes' the way I is'" (Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack*; Newbury Park, California: Windblown Media, 2007; p. 120-121).

Friends, bring your questions...let faith be a journey...God is with you and God is especially fond of you. Amen.