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Proper 14, Year A (1 Kings 9:9-18)  
August 10, 2008  
Grace Episcopal Church, Amherst, MA

What are you doing here? What are *you* doing *here*? What are you doing here, Elijah?

I imagine Elijah listening to God's question, looking down at his nails, wondering how his hands got so disgustingly muddy. After all, there had been a drought for years. Not just the kind where the lawns got brown, but the kind where people died because all the rivers ran dry. For years, Elijah watched it all wither, and for years he'd felt the burden of knowing why. He had watched souls grow as dry as the landscape, all worn out from worshipping things other than God.

[They had said that the most important thing was power. They had said that the most important thing was conformity. They had said that the most important thing was the bull God Baal, or whoever else was in favor with the current government. Somewhere among all those competing claims, the people of Israel had forgotten the one God who really deserved the deepest loyalties of their hearts. No wonder their world became a desert.]

For year, Elijah had kept the faith, literally, tending to a memory that seemed to be fading in everyone else. And this wet night, this was supposed to have been his time of triumph. He had finally proven—indisputably, he thought—the reality of God's presence. He had faced the court-sanctioned prophets of false gods in a cultic showdown, Hollywood-perfect in its drama. There had been fire from heaven. There had been rain, sheets of it, pouring down in divine confirmation. The drought was over, at last.

But, shockingly, painfully, none of it had made any difference; if anything, these signs of God's power had only made human powers more anxious. Dissenting voices were no more popular in ancient Israel than they are today. The government had picked off all the other genuine prophets, one by one; now, after such a public display of defiance, they were after him. As Elijah climbed that slippery mountain, he had a death sentence on his head, and he knew it.

It was all coming to nothing, all those years of patient faith. Nothing but dust in the rain; nothing but an empty cave in the middle of nowhere. He was exhausted from clambering up the steep mountain, maybe hands and knees sometimes. He was soaked to the bone. And now he was done. Elijah wasn't going to wait for them to hunt him down and finish him off. He had crawled off to die on his own. He's there in the cave, just staring at his hands, covered in the proof of his useless victory.

And then—that voice. Then that question, so simple and yet so devastating, not once but twice: What are you doing here, Elijah?

The words seem innocent enough on the page, but the more I listen to scripture, the more I realize how loaded they are. It's not just a simple request for information. After all, God knows all about the rain and the death sentence and the rest of it. God is, in fact, the reason that Elijah is in this dank hole in the mountain in the first place. This question is something else.

Here is a man who has gambled everything and seems poised to lose. Here is a man who has been given a job and seems to have failed at it even though he's done everything right. Here is a man who is so tired of it all that he is ready to lay face down in the dirt because he can't think what else to do. And yet, at this terrible moment of breaking, he strangely is invited into conversation with God. You, Elijah, what are you doing here?

God has this way of asking these questions of us that seem simple until we go to answer them. It happens all over scripture, if we pay attention. There at the very beginning: Where are you? Or, What are you looking for? What were you talking about on the road? Who do you say that I am? You—yes, you—what are you doing here?

What's so interesting to me about these questions is that they are only peripherally about God and mostly about us. God does not seem to be interested in our apprehensions of divinity, or how well we understand the greatness of heaven, or anything of that sort. God doesn't want to talk about himself. God wants to get us talking about what's going on in our own dirty, tired-out lives. And not small talk, either.

There are so many ways we could choose to respond. *What are you doing here?* I listen to Elijah's story and I want to answer on his behalf. Sometimes I want to express my anger, with a healthy bit of sarcasm thrown in for bite: I'm suffering for your sake, God, in case you hadn't noticed. Or I want to hide how bad it really is: Oh, I'm just contemplating the rocks here, figuring out what comes next. Or I want to change the subject: What I am doing? What about you, God? What are you doing? At times, I want to avoid conversation entirely. I imagine some part of Elijah might have wanted to turn his back to God, roll over, and go to sleep.

So many responses. All true, all fitting, in their own way. And yet none of them very honest, at the heart. All of them are answering God at a slant. All of them are avoiding the real invitation to honest conversation.

Elijah doesn't choose any of those halfway replies. It would have been easier, no doubt, but he was a stronger person than most of us. Perhaps all those years of being honest about what was worth worshipping have taught him something about telling the truth. So he simply tells his reality to God, without apology and without condition. What am I doing here, God? I have been very zealous for the LORD, and they are seeking my life to take it away. What am I doing here? I have loved you with all I have and now I have nothing left.

I wonder what it cost him to make that admission. Think about those own dark caves that you have crawled into. What does it take to tell God how disappointed you are in the way your life has turned out? What do you have to give up when you name your fear that there is no redemption from this rock-bound place? And yet—what happens when you finally do?

Honesty costs us, no doubt. But this story reminds me that it brings so much of worth.

For Elijah, God's response is swift. It gives just a few examples of the ways we get cared for when we admit our needs. In this case, Elijah gets a renewed commission—go, anoint, tear down, build up. He gets some promise that the old powers that have persecuted him will have

power no more; unjust authorities will be replaced by kings of God's own choosing. And he gets, at last, the assurance of some help, someone to inherit his work and carry it forward. God is clear that Elijah's story is not done. There is more action in store.

But even before these promises from God, I suspect Elijah's honesty has brought its own, intrinsic gifts. He has been to a place in his heart that is as full of sludge as the path up the mountain, a place as hard and as stony as the mountaintop. And yet he has heard God and answered him there. What a discovery: there is no place too remote for God to meet him. There is no place so wretched that God will hide from him. More importantly, there is no place so wretched that he has to hide from God.

Sooner or later, God invites us all to talk. It would be nice if it happened on those sunny days when we are on top of the world and could answer God easily. But, funny thing, those invitations seem to come in the drippy, midnight places instead. Perhaps it's more important for us to be talking to God there. Whatever the reason, God seeks us out, face down in the dirt as we are, and starts up with the questions. Where are you? What are you looking for? What are you doing here? Where are you going next? God asks us the ordinary details of our lives, knowing that our ability to name them rightly is something far out of the ordinary.

I cannot tell you how the rest of the conversation will go. Sometimes it's like Elijah, and there's news of what's next; sometimes there are promises of relief. Sometimes, God has harder things. Sometimes, I think, there is just consolation in grief. It's different for each one of us. No one else can have your conversation with God for you.

But some of the same questions are there for each of us today, if we listen. Is God asking something of you? What are you doing here? I suspect God is waiting for the answers we each have to give, if only we are brave enough to speak our own truth, wherever it takes us.