

Sermon: 12<sup>th</sup> May 2019. 1 Kings 19:1-18  
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### What are you doing *here*?

Did you come because that's what you always do? Or perhaps you woke up with the horrible sense that you'd much rather have the extra time in bed, or to finish all the household jobs that didn't get done yesterday? Are you here because you feel a sense of belonging to this community? Or are you here by default, because you don't know what else to do with your Sunday mornings?

Putting the question more generally: What are you doing here in St Andrews? Did you come here for a reason? Did you choose to end up in this place, or did it happen by accident? Are you just passing through for a few days, months, or years? Or have you set down roots here? Is it the right place for you to be? Or do you have the sense that you belong elsewhere?

I'd like to suggest that the words of this question which we find twice in today's Old Testament Reading—'**What are you doing here?**'-- can help us to reflect on what, and where, it is we are called to be as individuals and as a community.

Today is Vocation Sunday; churches around the province are exploring questions of calling. You might, like me, be exploring a calling to licenced or ordained ministry in the Church, or you might feel a strong sense of calling to a particular career or role within the community. Alternatively, the language of calling might be alien to you—you might lack a clear sense that God is calling you to be in a certain place or to do a certain task. However developed or clear our own sense of calling is, we can each understand this question that God asks to Elijah: **What are you doing here?** Even if our answer is: I have no idea.

In answering this question before God, we are given the opportunity to reflect not just on where we are, and who we are but also on where we think we should be and who we think we should be.

This morning, we'll be reflecting on these questions of calling, through the story of Elijah, a man evidently called to serve God as prophet at a time of immense difficulty. Elijah's story of calling can help each of us to reflect on our sense of calling and vocation, whatever that might look like.

### **1. Calling is costly**

When we encounter Elijah in this passage, he is at his lowest ebb. Commentaries often describe this moment as 'Elijah's burnout moment'; if we were to impose our modern understanding of mental health onto this passage, we would say that Elijah is in the midst of a severe episode of depression. Elijah describes that he has 'had enough' of life, that he is afraid of what is to come, and he asks the angel of the Lord to 'take his life'.

At this point in Elijah's ministry, the pressure is immense—he serves God at a time in which many people in Israel have turned their worship away from the God of Israel and to the Gods of Baal, including Ahab, the king of Israel. At the end of Chapter 18, after a showdown between Elijah and the God of Israel and the prophets of Baal, the God of Israel is victorious and Elijah murders many of the prophets of Baal. Where we pick up the story today, Elijah is on the run from Ahab and terrified of the implications of the events that have unfolded.

Elijah can attest to the fact that serving God is immensely costly. Following God's calling has cost Elijah his safety and security, his home, and has seemingly pushed him to his limits

as a human being such that he would rather be dead than continue in peril.

In one respect, this should hardly be surprising; Jesus tells us that ‘whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.’ And whilst I hope none of us present today are fleeing for our lives, it is important to recognise that following Christ, serving his kingdom and his Church will cost us. It will cost us time with our families, it will cost us progression in our careers, it will cost us our mental and emotional stability.

## **2. Secondly, living out our calling is always bound up in our weaknesses**

When we see Elijah first asked this question,

**‘What are you doing *here*?’**

his response is telling.

‘I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too’

Whilst Elijah doesn’t really answer this question, it’s clear from his response that his commitment to Israel has not waned through this period of distress. He describes himself as *zealous* for the purposes of God and to see God worshipped throughout Israel.

But Elijah also doesn’t have an accurate measure of things. He states that he is the only faithful person left, that only he is has remained true to the one God. But yet, a little later in this same passage, God tells Elijah that there are as many as 7000 who

have not worshipped Baal, who will be protected by God (19:18). So, whilst Elijah's passion and calling to God is still there in some sense, the situation has overwhelmed him, and there are serious question marks at this point about his emotional stability to keep going.

There is something refreshingly real about this. For Elijah's passion is well directed, but ultimately, distorted by his situation and emotional state. In asking ourselves: What are we doing here, in St Andrews, in this church, in our particular job or role, we must be aware that God's calling is always intertwined with our histories, failures, and weaknesses. We each bring something to our sense of calling—and none of us are immune from our own weakness and humanity, and none of us should believe that we might not come to a distorted sense of self-importance in relation to what God is asking us.

**3. But thirdly, in spite of the cost and in spite our own weakness, our calling is always bound up in God.**

God tells Elijah that he will pass by. And what follows are the events of fire, earthquake and storm, all manifestations of God's presence which would be familiar to the Israelites from their history. We are told that 'God was not in' any one of these manifestations. It is in the small whisper or voice that follows these events which draws Elijah out of his cave; confronting the reality of the living God, he covers his face, as Moses did many generations before him.

Yet, something about this encounter doesn't have the effect we'd expect, however. The sermon I wanted to preach tells us that in times of strife, drawing close to God's presence is all we need. But the reality we see presented in this passage is not this.

God asks Elijah again: What are you doing here?  
And again, Elijah responds: 'I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too'

There is a reason the writer records Elijah's responses to God before and after this event as identical: Elijah is humbled by the presence of God, but he is seemingly unchanged. His mood is not lifted, and his distorted sense of calling is not corrected. There is something very releasing about Elijah's encounter for those of us who have had times of emotional or spiritual difficulty and have found no easy fix, despite people tell us, 'if only we spent more time in prayer, we might feel better'.

But we also that Elijah's calling does not depend on his sense of self either. God does not correct Elijah, instead, God recommissions Elijah, by asking him to do three things:

1. Anoint Hazael as king of Aram
2. Anoint Jehu king of Israel
3. And anoint Elisha to succeed him as prophet

Elijah is recommissioned in spite of his brokenness not because of his worthiness. And there is hope for us here, despite how little we *feel* up to the task God is calling us to participate in.

And this is particularly brought home in reflecting on what Elijah goes on to achieve. For we know that whilst God commissions Elijah to do this work, the only thing which is fulfilled is the anointing of Elisha; Elijah never anoints Jehu or Hazael before he ascends to heaven. The work is not Elijah's, but God's. And if we read a little further on, we find that this work is completed, without Elijah's help.

And similarly, whilst God calls each of us to serve him and to worship him, many of our best made plans will remain unfinished—it can be a great relief to know that our calling is dependent on God, and not on our own achievement. The work is not ours, but Gods.

## **Response & Reflection**

J.R.R. Tolkien reflected on many of these themes on what it is to be called in his short story, 'Leaf by Niggle', about a painter tasked with completing a job too big to ever complete. Many people think this is an autobiographical story about Tolkien's own vocation. I'd like to end by retelling some of that story to you. And as you hear the words, I'd like you to consider those questions I began by asking you—What are you doing here? And, what is God asking of you here?

Niggle was a very particular kind of man who liked things to be just so, the kind of man who cared more about detail than big picture. One day, an idea for a painting came to Niggle—of an intricate leaf, attached to a beautiful tree, in the perfect mountain landscape. But Niggle was aware that someday soon, he would have to leave to make a very long journey. And so, he began at once to get to work on his picture.

Now, "Niggle was the sort of painter who could paint leaves better than trees. He would spend a long time on a single leaf, ensuring that he had gotten the colouring and shading just right. So, no matter how hard he worked, his canvas looked empty.

Niggle was also a man of a kind heart, and his neighbour, Parish, would often ask him for his help, and Niggle would almost always put down his paintbrush and help. One night, Parish when asked Niggle to go out into the wet and cold to fetch a doctor for his sick wife, Niggle comes down with a chill

and a fever, and despite working desperately to finish his canvas, he hears the knock on the door as the driver comes to take him on his final journey. Niggle leaves behind his unfinished painting. His neighbours, impressed by his work, hang a painting, 'Leaf, by Niggle' in the town museum, which is appreciated by a few people and soon forgotten.

But this is not the end of Niggle's story. As Niggle takes his journey to the afterlife, he begins to hear two voices: The first, which Niggle thinks can only be the voice of Justice, talks about the wasted time Niggle has spent and how little he has accomplished in life. The other gentler voice, Niggle thinks can only be Mercy, counters that Niggle chose a life of sacrifice for others, knowing what he was doing.

When Niggle reaches the outskirts of the heavenly country, something catches his eye and he runs towards it. "Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished; its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and yet had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. 'It is a gift!' he said."

The world before his death had almost entirely forgotten Niggle and his work. But in this new country, the real world, he finds his tree, his finished tree in all its glory. It was not just a fancy of his that had died with him. No, it was indeed part of the True Reality that would live and be enjoyed forever.

Let me ask you one last time:  
**What are you doing here?**