**1 Kings 19:9-18 & Matthew 14:22-33** August 30, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Pentecost 13

**Where Is God?**

*1 Kings 19:3Elijah was afraid and ran for his life… 8he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. 9There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10He replied, “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.”*

*Matthew 14:24The boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. 25During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to [his disciples], walking on the lake. 26When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.*

*(For the full text of the sermon readings noted above, consult you Bible)*

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the 1960’s when the first Soviet astronaut went into space, the Soviet president made a comment you would expect from a good atheist, “Gagarin”—that’s the name of the astronaut—“Gagarin went into space but he didn’t see any god.” (Wikipedia, “Yuri Gagarin”). The Soviet president was saying, “If there is a god, where is God?” We know, of course, that a man in space isn’t going to see God because God is spirit.

The surprising thing is that it isn’t just atheists who ask, “Where is God?” Believers do it too! Not only ordinary Christians, even got-my-name-in-the-Bible heroes of faith ask that question. In these two readings about Elijah and Jesus’ Twelve disciples we have people who, for two different reasons, essentially ask the same question.

If you, with them, have ever asked, **“Where Is God?”**

I would suggest you ask yourself these questions:

**I. Am I looking at myself instead of God?**

**II. Am I looking at my troubles instead of God?**

Do you remember Jonah—the prophet in a fish’s belly? Do remember how he got there? He tried to run away from his God-given work, but God caught up with him. In a sense, we find Elijah with Jonah. Elijah was running from his God-given duty as Israel’s prophet. Not without reason. The queen of the land, Queen Jezebel, had said to Jonah, *“May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not [take] your life.”* (19:2) “Elijah, you have 24 hours.” This was not an idle threat. Jezebel had assassinated many a prophet. All the resources of the kingdom at her disposal. So, Elijah made a break for it. He ran, literally, across Israel and Judah. At the end of Judah he left his servant behind and kept on running. He journeyed for 40 days in the wilderness until he came to Mount Sinai. What he was looking for I don’t know—we aren’t told—but he abandoned his post as God’s prophet in Israel.

There at Mt. Sinai, God appeared to him, not with words of comfort or consolation, but with a question. ***“What are you doing here?”*** (9) Now I gotta say, when God asks a question, it’s time to listen! God doesn’t ask questions for the sake of conversation. He wants you to think. *“Where are you, Adam?” “Cain, where is your brother Abel?” “Where were you, Job, when I laid the earth’s foundation?” “Have you any right to be angry, Jonah?” “Whose portrait is on this coin?” “Have you never read…?”* When God asks a question, he has had about enough of human foolishness but is going to give grace and mercy one last chance. ***“What are you doing here, Elijah?”***

But God’s question didn’t matter. Instead of thinking, Elijah complained bitterly, ***“I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down you altars…”*** blah, blah, blah, goes Elijah. It is all about Elijah the great, Israel the faithless, and God the out-to-lunch. Elijah is asking, “God, where have you been?”

And we can understand, a little. This is Elijah, who had believed that God would feed him by ravens bringing him food, who had journeyed to a widow in Jezebel’s back yard and lived in poverty and seclusion for three years, whom God had answered with fire from heaven—this Elijah could thump himself on the chest and indeed say, “These rebellious Israelites refuse to listen, but as for me…” Yet he had forgotten that word of God which says, *“You also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants.’”* (Luke 17:10) Yes, Elijah could be a humble man before others, but in his own mind he would always maintain that no one had done more for God than he had. That is why Elijah was asking, “God where are you?” He wasn’t looking for God. He was complaining against God.

Surprisingly, God doesn’t turn Elijah into charcoal. In his great mercy he tries to teach Elijah. God shows Elijah what he can do in wind, fire and earthquake. Then finally He makes himself known in a still small voice so that Elijah may understand that God prefers to not work by brute force, but through faith. God works through his humble Word, even as he does today among you. How patient, forgiving and loving is our God. He teaches Elijah quietly and then gives him a second chance. God asks a second time: ***“Elijah, what are you doing here?”***

Well, Elijah had been working on his speech for the last forty days and he wouldn’t let it rest. He answered with a complaint identical, *verbatim*, to his first complaint. Elijah is the junior officer complaining to the commander in chief, with words untempered by either repentance or restraint.

The most common question people, even unbelievers, ask in times of trouble is “Where is God?” And when they don’t get an answer, it is because they are not listening for the voice of God’s word. They think about how great and noble they are, how unfair life is. “Faithless Israel, ungrateful God, faithful Elijah? That’s me!”

Have you ever done that? Have you ever prepared a speech for God? Have you considered how faithful, hard-working, conscientious you are and how unfair it is that you still have to be just as faithful, hard-working and conscientious AND suffer for it?

Be silent and repent. Listen to what God is telling you in his Word. He does not act mightily according to the ways of this world, nor reward according to its standards. That you have life is a blessing, but there is more. God has richly blessed your life. He has prepared an unending wedding feast at the Second Coming. The wedding clothes of Christ’s righteousness have already been fitted for you to cover your ever fault, complaint and sin. Be patient. Be still. Know that God’s love for you is eternal, that he will strengthen you in the face of temptation and suffering, specifically so that after this life you will enter eternity.

Before proceeding, we must consider God’s final reply to Elijah. ***“Elijah, go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu… king over Israel, and anoint Elisha… to succeed you as prophet.”*** Most often, rededication is the best way to overcome the arrogance that leads us to doubt God. We need to be reminded that our purpose in this world is not for ourselves, but for others and God. Only then do we get our eyes off ourselves, and onto God’s people and his work and his mercy.

Then God promises Elijah his gracious blessing: ***“I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”*** (18) “Elijah, if you had just been humble and faithful, you would have seen me in the hearts and lives of my people. No, they are not many. No, they aren’t the mighty, but they are there. And you Elijah have the good news of my abiding love and faithfulness which will strengthen them, and you!”

Elijah had had his eyes on himself. That is why he couldn’t see God.

**II**

But what about Jesus’ disciples? Elijah’s problem, down to its core, had been a curious mix of pride and fear. The disciples suffered from something different. When they looked at their troubles, they simply felt overwhelmed.

Jesus had ordered them into a boat. Obediently they began rowing the 5 or 6 miles across the Sea of Galilee. The wind blew hard, but, obedient to Jesus, they struggled for the other shore. In the blackness of night with no stars, moon, or lights, one and then another of the disciples was afraid, and then realized that they were not alone in the wind and waves. It seemed to be—no, it couldn’t be—a man… walking on the water. ***“It’s a ghost!”*** They shouted in terror. Sounds silly. But really, what else could have been walking the waves?

These disciples were terrified in their troubles. They didn’t exactly ask, “Where is God?”, because they never even thought about God.

Sharing your flesh and blood, I understand or at least can imagine the many kinds of stress working on you. Do you have trouble letting go of the resentment of ridicule? Do you fear deadlines and high expectations at work? Do you worry about being able to meet the financial needs of family, of somehow failing to properly prepare children for life, of neglecting friends? All these stresses pile upon us and we feel like we are drowning in responsibility and failure. We are not paying attention to where God is because we are looking at our troubles instead of God.

I’ve told this story before, but I think it is worth repeating. Several years ago, on another continent, another missionary and I visited a church in a remote village on the shores of Lake Malawi. The shining blue lake, the red-brown mountains lying beneath the lush tropical vegetation made the descent into the village one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen! The next day we drove out of the village on the same road, the only road in and out of that village. It was a dirt trail ascending a steep mountain-side. It had just rained, so the trail was rutted, muddy, slippery. Over the years, several vehicles had gone over the side of the mountain and people had died. As our vehicle climbed the muddy mountain path, the driver had trouble shifting gears. The vehicle stalled. The driver engaged the brakes. Even with the wheels locked, the vehicle began to slide down the muddy mountain path backwards! My whole body tingled. In the seat behind me a woman *immediately* began using Jesus’ name—in prayer. What a great Christian faith she had! In her time of trouble and worry, she knew exactly where to turn, and immediately. I felt inspired—and a little ashamed.

And that was Peter the second time around. Yes, the second time around. For as soon as Jesus, from out on the water told them, ***“It is I. Don’t be afraid.”*** The disciples recognized Jesus on the water. ***“‘Lord, if it’s you,’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to you on the water.’ ‘Come,’ he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”*** (28-30)

When I hear the sinking disciple cry out, I laugh, not at Peter sinking, but in joy that he knows where to find help. He doesn’t just say, “Oh no, I am drowning!” Now he knows where to look! He no longer wonders, “Where is God when I need him?” Instead he says, ***“Lord!”***, he says ***“Save!”*** He knows right where to look for help when he is in trouble.

Twice in our reading, Jesus answered their trouble. When the disciples were yelling in terror at the water-walking “ghost”, ***“Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage!’”*** When sinking Peter cried out, ***“‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.”*** In our need, God will always give us what we need. Sometimes, like the disciples, God delivers us out of our trouble. Other times, like Elijah who wanted some sort of divine apology, we don’t get what we want, but God reveals to us our path and assures us of his presence.

We have heard but two of a great number of ways that we become disheartened in this world. We could add many more. But seeing these two, we realize principles that apply in every time of anxiety. When we feel overwhelmed, the question should not be “Where is God?” but rather, “Like Elijah, are you looking at yourself instead of God? Or like Jesus’ disciples, are you looking at your troubles instead of God?” Where is God in your time of trouble? Right where he has always been and will always be for every breath of your life; God is right next to you. For Jesus’ sake he patiently bears with you in your times of little faith. He always speaks in his Word to guide you. In his loving almighty power he directs your course in a way that is most sure to get you, his chosen one, to heaven with him.

I started with an astronaut story, let’s end with one. On Christmas Eve, 1968, the crew of the rocket ship *Apollo 8* was circling the moon. In the most watched television broadcast at the time, as they looked back at the earth, they read from the Book of Genesis, *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth…”* These astronauts, they did see God. They knew where to look. Amen. (Wikipedia, *“Apollo 8 Genesis reading”*)