

Simple Questions
The Second Sunday after Pentecost
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Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" Our stories this morning, as they often are, are from different times and places than ours. And as they often are, the stories themselves are different from each other - from different people facing different circumstances and ways of imagining God. Yet, in each story, a relatively simple question is asked. Elijah, on the lam, tired and afraid, hiding, hears the voice of God asking him, "What are you doing here?" And then, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus steps out of a boat into a chaotic scene with another distraught and disturbed man, this one naked, and asks him, "What is your name?"

These aren't hard questions. It's not "what is the meaning of life?" or "why is there evil and suffering in the world?" nor even just academic stumpers that Elijah or the Gerasene man might not have studied for. Yet, both of the men respond to these simple questions with answers that aren't quite right. Neither of them is able to answer the simple question with accuracy and truth.

When God asks him to explain what is going on, Elijah responds, not a little defensively, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the king of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." To be fair, parts of this are right. Elijah has been zealous, though questionably - having killed numbers of Jezebel's false prophets, and the Israelites have forsaken the covenant, and people are after him - namely Jezebel and her minions. But tucked away in his response is a glaring mistake: "I alone am left." Elijah believes himself to be abandoned and alone when he is not. He has been until recently in the company of others, he has been fed by widows, tended to even by ravens, and God has never left him - sending an angel to touch him and remind him to rest and eat, and at this very moment God is speaking with Elijah and will soon make God's presence known even in silence.

God asks, "what are you doing here?" and Elijah answers from a place of fear. He is unable to see beyond his own nose, unable to imagine a future beyond the moment he feels trapped in, and mistakenly believes that he is uniquely abandoned. While it is a dark and confusing time and his burden is indeed heavy, Elijah believes the lie that his fear tells him - that he is alone and that he has no path forward, asking that he might die instead.

And Jesus asks the man of the city who had demons, "What is your name?" And the man cannot answer with his given name, nor with his true identity. He answered, "Legion." This response is heartbreaking, and like Elijah's answer, it also rises from a place of fear and desperation and loneliness. He cannot answer this simple question. Either he has forgotten, so long has he been away from himself, or he too has become convinced of a lie - that he and the demons are the same. This anonymous man has become defined by the legion, literally - the mob, the swarm of raging voices, and he has so lost himself that he has lost his identity. Inside the fear and darkness, he has come to believe the lie that these legions have become who he is.

Jesus asks him his name, and he answers with the lie he has come to believe. God asks Elijah what he is doing, and he answers with the lie he has come to believe. In both stories though more follows. God in a grand display shows Elijah that he is not alone and that the noise and chaos of his life will not overwhelm him. In a most human way, it takes Elijah more than one round to

understand. Did you notice God asks the same simple question twice, and Elijah gives the same answer - even after this mystical experience at the entrance of the cave? And still God patiently responds with the next steps that Elijah must take, now that he has rested and eaten and been reminded of God's presence, God tells him, "Go, return on your way." Elijah will still be in the wilderness and the threats are not gone, but in the very next verses, God tells Elijah that Elisha will join him as a fellow prophet and that they will find seven thousand faithful Israelites. Not to mention, of course, that God is with Elijah all the way. Elijah is not alone, and after this moment to restore himself, there is a future for him still unfolding, and more work to do.

And in our Gospel story, Jesus does not accept "Legion" as a correct answer. He rebukes the swirling and raving mob, until the man is able to clothe himself and, in his right mind, sit at the feet of Jesus. Jesus pulls him back from a place of death and separation and returns him to his community and to himself. By the end of the story, again despite the human fears that keep us wary and slow to respond and while we still do not know his real name, it is obvious that he has claimed his identity as a follower of Christ and one who belongs in the city. He leaves his frightening and disordered life among the dead and lives with his neighbors again, recognizable to them and to himself as a beloved child of God. And getting up from his seat at Jesus' feet, now he also has work to do.

What about us? We are walking through our days with so many questions. After the events at our sister church in Birmingham: How could a potluck dinner become a place of death? What will it take to stem the tide of gun violence? As we see the pictures of the destruction out west and move carefully through our own overheated days: How are we to look at stories of fires and floods in our world? What will it take to change the trajectory of climate change? Scrolling past stories of congressional hearings and of war: How do we make sense of the machinations of power-hungry leaders? What will awaken a spirit of honesty and of peace? And even in our private lives, questions swirl. What does this diagnosis mean? How can this relationship be repaired? How do I pick up the pieces? We are all trying to get our small arms around enormous issues - in the world and in our own hearts.

God meets us not today not with answers, but two more questions. But not huge and intractable questions, rather simple questions that might help us toward better answers. What are you doing here, Elijah? What are you and I doing here? And what is your name? Who are we, you and I? What we might learn from these stories is how *not* to get the answer wrong. That means not answering from a place of fear, from the shadows of death and despair. That means not offering mistaken beliefs or lies we've come to believe but answering these simple questions with simple truths. What you and I are doing here is resting a moment, and then continuing to walk on our way through the wilderness - remembering that we are not alone and we're not done. Who we are are the children of God, beloved. Who we are are followers of Christ - followers of the one who meets us in the chaos to call us back to our true identity. And with these answers - with a rest and then a nudge back onto the hard road to follow, but not alone, with a reclaimed identity and a right mind, we return to the work we need to do.

I've always loved the Episcopal Church for its love of the questions. And for me, the Bible has always been more of a book of questions than a book of answers. Today, I give thanks that these simple questions give rise to beautiful answers. Rest and remember: you are not alone. I am not alone. We can return on our way even through the wilderness, understanding that we are in good company. There is work to do, and we need to get back to it - after some time with God. And you are not the chaos of voices inside your mind, nor the raging cacophony outside. My name is not Legion, yours isn't either. You and I are freed from our demons, and after we sit for a while with Christ, we can return on our way, strengthened to meet the questions of our days.