

“What Are You Doing Here?”

1 Kings 19:1-19

In Mississippi you don't have to have a license, or didn't when I started riding a motorcycle. Like a lot of things in Mississippi you don't have to have a license. Well, I moved to Georgia and I commuted a lot of miles on a motorcycle. I moved to Georgia and lo and behold, they want you to take a test. Not only a written test, but they want you to ride around in front of somebody and get a license. That's the only way you can do it. I said, "Hey, Mississippi is in the south. Won't it just transfer?" "No. You have to take the test." I was confident. I have many thousands of miles on the motorcycle and I should be able to knock this off. I took the written test and did fine. I went out in front of the lady with the clipboard though, and I had to swerve around these cones. Lo and behold, I knocked over too many cones. "This just can't be real. This can't be happening." "Sorry, sir, you'll have to come back." I told myself, "I was just nervous. It was too cold. That's what it was. I was stiff." So I went back. Took the test, got out there with the lady with the clipboard, and rode around again, and this time I was going to prove it to her. It was the same lady. I didn't hit any cones or didn't make any mistakes. I came up to the end and I had this kind of attitude through my helmet, "heh-heh-heh." I began to get off the bike and I hadn't put the kickstand down and whoomp she goes, "Dropped the bike - failed!" Oh, good grief! I felt that pretty terribly because you have to know motorcyclists. They think they're perfect and they can drive better than everybody else, and I failed! I was very unsure of myself. "I'm going to sell the motorcycle. I'm done. Obviously I can't ride a motorcycle. The state of Georgia has finally revealed this to me." But, I had to go back. I went back and finally got all the way through it. Got the license, and that was done. How do you think I felt with those failures knowing that I would have to go back and face the lady with the clipboard again? Can you get in my shoes even if you don't ride a motorcycle? It's no fun to fail. It's no fun to go from extreme confidence to a complete lack of confidence in something you're supposed to be good at.

The story doesn't end. Earlier this year I was going to work at New Horizons Ministries in downtown Seattle. It's on Third Avenue. They cook meals for the homeless kids. I rode my motorcycle and parked on the street. There were a lot of tourists out. People were all out on the streets near the Space Needle. I began to park the motorcycle, and got off. I had my helmet on and I'm all padded. I guess I just didn't learn because I didn't put the kickstand down and I went to get off and the weight of the bike through me out into the middle of Third Avenue in front of all these people and all these cars, and I just lay there a minute. I got up and I picked the motorcycle up like, "I meant to do that. I do that all the time." Then here's the teller: I walked a whole block before I took my motorcycle helmet off. I didn't want anybody to see my face or know who I was. Complete humiliation. It brought me back down to earth in a lot of ways.

Failure in contrast to success, and uncertainty about yourself and your mission and your effectiveness in contrast to being effective and being confident is tough. It happens in a lot more serious things than riding a motorcycle. Some of you have had big dreams given you by the Lord for how your marriage, or your family, or your relationship with your kids ought to turn out. Some of you have had big dreams for how your investment in your work, in your business, your career or your job should go. You've tried to bring Christian principles into it. You've tried to treat it as a calling and to go about it faithfully and with integrity and with truth and to build relationships that could be shaped by your obedience to Christ in that context. Some of you have been called to ministries in a church or outside the church or associated with the church with great hopes only to see them not pan out or not work out the way you thought they would. And, you know that that hurts. It makes you uncertain about yourself, about your calling, about whether you ever heard God in the first place, about whether you were being silly, and worst of all is if you have to go back and do it again. If you can't let it go for whatever reason you have to back into the same circumstance and try one more time. You would love to just walk away. You'd love to call it a failure, a lesson learned and leave it. But, there are those times when you know, and when God says, "You've got to go back."

Now, with that said, let us look at our text today. 1 Kings 19 takes place right after one of the biggest, most dramatic events in the prophet Elijah's life. The people of Israel had grown faithless. They started worshipping the gods of Jezebel, a woman that was married to Ahab. They were worshipping the Baals. Elijah set up a confrontation that was full of drama. He said to all these prophets of Baal, right in front of everybody, "Set up your sacrifice to Baal and I'll set up my sacrifice to Yahweh (to the God of Israel) and the God who answers our prayers by fire and lights the sacrifice himself is the true God of Israel, the true God of all the earth." You know the story. You've probably read it before. The prophets of Baal were not successful. It was Elijah's turn and he added even a little more twist to it because he told everybody, "I want you to drench the sacrifice in water." When he prayed, the Lord answered with

fire and the sacrifice was lit. It was interesting; you can see Chapter 18 he says, "Answer me, O Lord, so the people will know that you are turning their hearts back again." And when they saw that they said, "The Lord is God. Yahweh, he is God, not Baal." You would think, "Boy, that's successful. That's a good way to end the story. Roll the credits." But now we come to Chapter 19.

¹ Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." ³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. ⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He 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." ¹¹ The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He 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." ¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. (NIV)

These will go on and act in judgment on the people of Israel. And then interestingly in verse 18, the Lord concludes:

¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." (NIV)

I want to focus on that phrase "Go back" because that's kind of after the question, that's what the Lord says, "I want you to go back the way that you came. Go back, Elijah." Now, those are hard words to hear sometimes, especially if you think that people are trying to kill you, if you know people are trying to kill you. If everything is falling apart and the bottom is out of it all and you say, "I can't do it." And the Lord says, "Go back." But I want you to see what the Lord is also saying to Elijah, and saying to you and me that will allow us to go back in a direction that we may not want to go back, that will allow us to recover when we've experienced failure.

How is it that the Lord says, "Go back"? The first thing that He says is, "Go back," but not with the same perspective on things. Part of Elijah's experience had been that he was a self-sufficient, kind of a stand-alone prophet, who stood up against all the hard forces out there. But, when the straw breaks the camel's back and Elijah finds himself weak and afraid and discouraged, he has to go back now with the perspective of the Lord's care. The Lord is who strengthened him for the journey, the Lord is who provided for him along the way, the Lord is who was interested in his brokenness, and the Lord was now taking care of the "great caretaker." "Go back, but not with the same perspective." Elijah now had an experience of the Lord's sufficiency, not for Israel, not for the people of God, not for the world in big terms, but for himself personally. So, the Lord could say, "Go back. I care for you." Elijah needed to go back and remember the love of God for him personally. It is so easy for people with big tasks and big purposes to get lost in their task. Now, I'm talking about Christians, followers of Christ, that forget their perspective is not just about completing your job, not just about solving the problem ahead of you, but about loving God and, more importantly being loved by God. That may sound kind of saccharin, kind of nice, but it's true. We set up for weakness when we lose touch with God's great love and care for us. We go back in strength when we remember that He is the one who holds us in His hands, and He does care.

Elijah has to go back with a different perspective on the purpose of God. It's not just to win. Elijah was there, as he said, to try to turn the people's hearts back to God. I'm sure he was relentless in that, but he has to go back with a different perspective that his job is not just to win people over. His job is to go back and represent the Lord to the people. There's a nuance of difference in that. It's not his job to win the people over, to persuade. That's the Holy Spirit's job even in the Old Testament. The people have a responsibility in that, too. He can't make them convert. He can't make them repent. He can't make them get it.

When we have a perspective on our calling in life that it's about winning, it's about getting people to see it our way, and we're relentless about that. We set ourselves up for a collapse when they don't. When they don't respond, when they don't listen and they don't see it our way we're liable to feel very black and white about it. I either succeeded or I failed. Elijah has to go back with a different perspective that is about representing the Lord's presence among the people, and maybe a little less about winning, and that's why the Lord tells him, "You're going to have to give away some of your tasks of judgment and leadership. You're going to have to prepare someone else to do that." Persuasion is the Lord's job.

Now, churches as a whole can do this sometime. We live in a place that's not exactly warm to Christian faith. You're in the Pacific Northwest. As a result, it's very easy sometime for churches to feel isolated like bastions and fortresses against an oppressive outside world. Or, to feel like we have to present ourselves so relentlessly and so well that people can't help but believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior, the Son of God. If we're careful we exhaust ourselves trying to prove something to people that only Christ can prove. Now, understand me. Our job is to speak. Our job is to represent Christ, but there's a little bit of nuance of difference, a different perspective. You can sort of relax when you remember that it is the Lord's job to persuade. It is not all up to you.

Jesus said to send somebody back later in the New Testament. If you have your Bible you might turn to a familiar passage in John 21. After Jesus' resurrection there was a lot of confusion among the disciples about what they were supposed to do and how to recall what Jesus had said would be their mission. Peter, at one point, said, "I'm going back fishing." So they went back to Galilee and were fishing, and you know the story from John 21. The Lord Jesus appears on the lake, the risen Lord Jesus. They go to meet him and interestingly he prepared a meal for them just like was prepared for Elijah. They're standing around and the Lord had something very special and direct to say to Peter. Peter, had denied him three times during his trial, was probably feeling like, "Well, I've completely blown it. I'm out. I'm done." But listen carefully—it says in John 21:15:

¹⁵When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." ¹⁷The third time he said to him, (Get that? Three times, one for each denial.) "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. (NIV)

That's Jesus' way of saying, "Go back, Peter. You have a calling. You are the Rock. You're rock of faith is the rock upon which I'll build my church. But it's a foundation and it's not all about you. In the meantime, go back and serve according to the calling I've placed in your life. Go back. Feed my sheep." That's the way of Jesus, it's the way of the Lord.

The Lord says, "Go back, not with the same perspective, but also not by yourself." This is very important. Do you think that I went out and told my friends that I'd failed my motorcycle test? The last thing I'm going to do is let that out. I just want to be alone, didn't want to talk about it. That's what we do when collapse happens. Though we need people, there's a part of us that tends to isolate ourselves, whether it's out of embarrassment or just that sense of, "Man nobody knows what this is like, what goes on when we collapse in some way, when things don't work out." But the Lord says, "Go back, but not by yourself."

Here's Elijah. He's already left his servant, he's out on his lonely journey, he emphasizes, "I alone am left." two times. He feels his loneliness, he kind of feeds it, he reinforces it, and the Lord tells him, "When you go back, you need to remember first I'm with you and I love you, and that's been proven. But also, Elijah you need to cultivate a sense of partnership with other people." He tells him to bring in these other kings, these other figures into a roll that will continue and extend the prophetic ministry he's had, and will bring judgment on the people. Then He says, "I

want you to anoint Elisha to come along after you as a prophet. I want you to mentor him.” It can take humility to share a load. Sometimes we want to do it ourselves. We have more control; we know what we’re thinking. It can be hard to give away the task. The Lord says, “Go back when you haven’t been able to carry it by yourself and bring others into the responsibility with you. Don’t carry it all.” It’s very, very important to see it. We see it throughout the New Testament in that Christian faith is not just an individual journey, it’s a community, a fellowship with other believers in which we gain strength and give strength from one another as we walk in Christ. Elijah had forgotten to notice that there were other prophets, which there were according to I Kings, running around. Elijah had overlooked that there were seven thousand people who had not compromised their faith. He needed to be reminded that he was going back, but not alone. The Lord also says, “Go back, but don’t do the same things the same way.” Just a little bit of spin on this: “Elijah, it’s not going to be about you by yourself confronting these situations. Cooperate with others, do it differently. Don’t look to your strengths or your weaknesses alone.”

Jesus pretty much said the same thing to Peter. His call to him originally was to be part of a group of disciples. And perhaps Peter hearing the Lord say early on, “You are Peter and on this rock of faith I will build my church” grew a concept within himself, “I’ll have to be the great leader.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. Don’t lord above them, interact and care for them.” Maybe Jesus is bringing a different nuance of service and call to Peter than He had before when He sends him back.

Then, thirdly, when you go back don’t do the same things the same way, the Lord says. One way to do that is to recognize what did work. That’s perhaps why the Lord says to Elijah, “There are seven thousand people who have not compromised and still follow me.”

Sometimes it’s easy for us to have a fixation on the big thing so that we overlook some of the little things, the seemingly little things that God does along the way. We’re so fixed on an outcome we have in mind that we forget to see what’s right in front of us. It’s really interesting. Jesus refers to Elijah one time in the New Testament, and what do you think he recalls about Elijah? That incident with the prophets of Baal? No. In Luke 4 he says,

²⁴“I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.” (NIV)

What did Jesus notice about Elijah’s ministry? Not the grandiose stuff but that he went to the overlooked, to the downtrodden, that he reached out to those people. So, as you think about your times of failure, a collapse that you may have had as a Christian, I want you to remember that the Lord says, “Go back. Go back with a different perspective. Don’t go back alone. Go back and don’t do things the same way. The great thing about this passage of scripture is that the Lord in effect says, “You can go back.” You don’t have to live in failure or defeat because it didn’t work. It’s His battle, it’s His job, not yours. There’s a tremendous comfort in that for those of us who at times feel like we haven’t cut it.

Two keys to being able to go back in the Lord’s strength that I want to leave you with. First, encounter the Lord as he really is. The Lord showed up at the cave, but not as Elijah expected. He was used to fire and dramatic stuff, and so he didn’t even cover his face when the earthquake and the fire and the wind blowing are around out there, but he does encounter the Lord in an unexpected way in that quiet whisper, and then he knows that he’s about to encounter the holiness of God. He has to let the Lord speak. The Lord wants to speak and for us to hear him in the way He wants to be heard. You and I do, too. In times when things haven’t worked, we tend to go back and we want to hear the Lord do or say the same old things. We need to be in a position to hear His quiet voice and we need to be in a position to let Him ask some questions. There is a world of examination in that question, “What are you doing here, Elijah? What brought you here? What are you doing in this place instead of where I have you to be?” It means a lot more than just the obvious. When you would be refreshed after a time of brokenness, when you hear the Lord, listen to Him as He wants to speak and let Him ask you some questions, some probing questions. You might find that He’s pushing you on your first steps on your way back to service, on your way back to confidence in your roll of ministry, your roll of representing Christ. You may find that going back that way produces a different outcome. In fact I’m confident you will.