

1 Kings 18:20-29

So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' The people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets number four hundred and fifty. Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.' All the people answered, 'Well spoken!' Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.' So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.' Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

“Who Mentored the Master; Jesus and Elijah?”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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And Elijah said, "If the Lord is God, follow him." This is presumptuous, but I will presume it, and you can decide if I'm right, but before you judge it, please wait until I finish. I think the message of this sermon is the most important one you will hear ever in your life. In fact, I think it's so important I suggest that you tell the people who have taken time off for Spring Break, which includes two of our pastors, they need to hear it. What is the most important question you will ever be asked? This morning, I'm going to tell you, but please wait until I finish.

Some are convinced that the most important question is, "What time is it?" You've heard about the who was driving all night, and when morning came, he was far from his home, and so he parked his car in a quiet neighborhood, so he could sleep a couple hours before heading out again. But he parked on a street where lots of joggers ran, and just as he dropped off to sleep, some jogger tapped the window of his car and said, "Excuse me, do you have the time?" He looked at his watch. "It's eight-fifteen." And he went back to sleep. And then another jogger tapped his window, same question, "What time do you have?" He awakened. "It's now eight-forty-five." This happened another time, or maybe another time or two. Noticing that he was in this flow of joggers, he decided to put a stop to it, so he made a sign, and he taped it to the window of his car. It said, "I do not know the time." And he drifted off to sleep. And then, there was a tap on the window of his car. A jogger wanting to be helpful, said, "Sir, Sir, wake up. It's nine-fifteen."

Is the most important question in life, "What time is it?" Could be, because timing is everything. If you know what time it is, you know when to buy and when to sell, you could be rich. And the writer of Ecclesiastes would remind us there is a time for everything, a time to live and a time to die, a time to laugh and a time to cry. A time for war and a time for peace. What time is it? Is that the most important question?

Some people think the most important question is, "What's your name?" Maybe that's it. It's like the woman who went to the cemetery, she couldn't find her husband's grave and so she went to the office. "I can't find his grave. I thought I knew where it is, but I can't find it. Could you look it up for me? His name is Thomas Norton." And so the cemetery manager looked through the index cards and said, "We don't have a Thomas Norton, but we do have an Alice Norton." "That's him. That's him. Before he died, we decided to put everything in my name."

What's your name? Is that the most important question? To know who you are by name has given you a place in a family. It says something about you, and we all like to hear our names, and it means a lot to be in a place where everybody knows our name. "Hey, isn't that Mary's boy?" "Oh, that's Joseph's son." They knew his name in Nazareth. For Jesus, it looks like the most important question is neither of those. It's the one he put to the disciples. "Who do you say that I am? Who are they saying I am? What are they saying about me?" Was that the most important question for Jesus? Because, look at the answers they told him. Peter said three things in answer to the question, "What are they saying about me? Who do they say that I am?" First of all, people were saying, Peter said, "You're one of the prophets. You have a way with words, like Isaiah, like Jeremiah. Isaiah, who said, "God has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to open the prisons for those who are bound." Or Amos, who said, "I hate, I despise your feast, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. I will not listen to your harps. I take no delight in the noise of your song. I'm not impressed with your pipe organ or your choir, but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness from an ever-flowing stream." Amos had a way with words. Or Micah. "What do you think God requires of us? God has shown us what is good. What the Lord requires is that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." Those prophets had a way with words, and people thought the same of Jesus.

Bill Coffin said, "To Christians, Jesus is the Rosetta Stone of history, making meaningful the hieroglyphics of heaven of Heaven and Earth in a world where lots of words just fill silence with noise, just make sound to break the monotony. Words can be so confusing.

A couple having dinner, he loved the chicken she fixed. Loved the flavor of it, and said to her, "What did you marinate this in?" She went off on a long explanation about how much they had in common, about how much he meant to her, and how much she loved him. And he just sat there and smiled, and finally, she said, "What was your question? I thought you asked, if I would marry you again." And she left the room, and he called to her, "Well, would you marry me again?" And she stopped, and she turned around and looked at him, straight in the face, and without hesitation, she said, "Vinegar and barbecue sauce."

Maybe she didn't hear him. Then again, maybe she did. Prophets had a way with words, and so did Jesus, and his words spoke of God as Abba, loving parent. His words told of a God who seeks to be present to us and who forgives us and who does not lead us into temptation. His words, like the prophets, he had a way with words. "Who do you say that I am?" "They say that you are a prophet. You have a way with words." Secondly, Peter said, "Some are saying you're like John the Baptist or Elijah." John the Baptist or Elijah - wow. To be thought of like that. To be at a place and time... I mean, those two made moments momentous. John the Baptist, once upon a time, baptized people in the Jordan River, and the Spirit of God descended. That's John the Baptist. And Elijah took on the worshippers of Baal. Elijah had this moment that was momentous, at a place and time. "How long," he said, "will you go on limping around with different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow God. Choose this day who you're going to follow." It was a moment. It was a turn in time, a place in time.

Those things happen. Sonia Ely saw one of those moments watching her five year old granddaughter. The little girl staged a wedding. She was first the mother of the bride, then she became the bride, and her teddy bear was the groom, and then she became the minister, and the minister said to the bride and the bear, "Let me read you your rights. You have a right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be held against you, and you have a right to an attorney present, and you may kiss the bride." That was a moment. That was an event, a place in time. Sonia's grandmother will never forget it. A single act in time. A sense of place in time. Mother Teresa said, "When I was in London, I went to visit the homeless people where our sisters have a soup kitchen, and one man who was living in a cardboard box reached out to me and held onto my hand and he said to me, 'You know, it's been a long time since I felt the warmth of a human hand.'" One simple act can change the world, and sometimes it's not the act the world is most aware of happening.

For example, I imagine many of us recall the moon landing, the first one. Who can forget it? If we were alive and watching and listening to that wonderful event. Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong, you know... touching down on the moon as we know, they almost missed it, almost went into a ravine. Michael Collins in the command module above them..... And

then this moment that was momentous, this place in time, those words, "One small step for man, one giant step for mankind." Most people think that was the moment. Most people remember the words. The moment was an event. Because they had very little fuel left, and they knew it. They were concerned they may not be able to lift off the moon. And many of us, now we know President Nixon had a speech prepared if they didn't make it. He was going to tell us, our nation, "Look at the moon. Every time you look at the moon, just remember those two brave astronauts up there." Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, on the moon. They had a meal. It was the place and time. Remember the words that Buzz Aldrin said? "I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever you are, to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks in your own individual ways." And then, they had a meal. They opened the plastic packages. It was the first meal on the moon, and it was bread and wine. It was communion. It was bread and wine poured into the chalice Buzz's church had given him, a Methodist church, by the way. It was an event that pointed beyond themselves. It pointed to God.

So we think of those times, like Elijah at Mount Carmel or John the Baptist in the River Jordan, or Jesus on the Mount, or Lincoln at Gettysburg, or Teresa in Calcutta, or Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. Or we think of the student at Tiananmen Square, or we think of Sadako, after the bombing making paper cranes and praying for peace, or we think of those firefighters running into the building as it collapsed on 9/11. Moments that become events of place and time beyond ourselves, and Jesus - "Who do they say I am?" "They say you're John or that you're Elijah, they say that you had a place in time. They say that you are a prophet, you have a way with words, and you had a place in time." Thirdly, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. They say that you lived your life showing people God, the Living God. The Living God."

Jesus had this power of persuasion, by the way he lived his life. It wasn't just his words, and it wasn't just his place in time, it was the power of the persuasion that came, and the way he lived his whole life. There was kindness behind those eyes, there was compassion in the words. John Mackie, who is a Biblical scholar, said, "You know, Jesus cast such a shadow in his life, that from the day he lived to our day, that shadow has continued to us so that we can know him just as they did." That is the power of persuasion. We follow that.

How do we lead people? Lou Holtz, the football coach, tells the story of a blind man who was being led down the street by his dog, and when they came to the corner of a busy intersection, the dog crossed against the light, and the blind man had no choice but to follow, and cars swerved to avoid them, and drivers honked their horns and swore loudly, and somehow they made it to the other side. As they stopped at the corner, the blind man pulled out from his pocket a dog biscuit and offered it to this reckless animal. Having watched the two as they crossed the street, a bystander tapped the blind man on the shoulder and he said, "Sir, that dog almost got you killed. Now, the last possible thing you want to do is to give that dog a reward for what he's done." The blind man smiled

and said, "I'm not giving him a reward, I'm trying to find his mouth so I can kick the other end."

Long after they forget our words, they will remember the way we influenced them by the way we lived our lives, when we led them. Long after they cease to recall our heroic deeds, they will hold fast to the sense of what we're about by the way we influenced the things that happened, by the way we lived our lives, by the power of our persuasion. How do we lead others? Gandhi once said, "There is more to life than just increasing the speed. There's a beautiful sunset we can persuade people to look at it. There's the greatness in the world and it's close by. We can persuade people to turn around and see. And there is God in the world, a powerful presence, a supportive nearness, and we can persuade people to listen to the voice, though it's small, and sometimes still.

The disciples would always remember that day in the boat, when the storm came up and Jesus calmed the storm, he calmed their hearts. And people will never forget that day that Jesus was arrested, and Peter reached and got his sword and cut off the ear of the captain of the guard, and Jesus restored it, and he said, "You're going to live by the sword, you're going to die by the sword." It was the power of persuasion, given by the way he lived his life, that led him beyond himself to God.

What is the most important question in life? Some will tell you the most important question is, "What time is it?" and today's a good day to ponder that, as they've got our clocks all messed up. Some will tell you the most important question is, "Who are you?" but you know, it is the case, it almost takes a lifetime to know that. And if you look at the Scripture reading and Jesus and Peter talking, the question Jesus asked, maybe the most important question, "Who do they say I am, what are they saying about me, what are they saying?" but that isn't the most important question.

I want to tell you a story. It may have something to do with this sermon, but I've never hesitated to tell a good story, whether it had something to do with the sermon or not, so I'll tell you the story. Frank Lehman tells it. The Assembly of God Church in Bushnell, Florida. Assembly of God Church in Bushnell Florida received a computer-generated letter from the American Family Publishers. Assembly of God Church, computer-generated letter that said, "Dear God of Bushnell Florida. You have been named as a finalist in the American Publishers Sweepstakes. God, we've been searching for you. God, can you imagine the looks that will be on your neighbors' faces when they see that you might have won? God, don't just stand there." American Family Publishers, by accident they have found the most important question in life for every one of us. We have a way with words, we have place in time, and we have the power to persuade by the way we live, but the most important question, by our words, our deeds, and our life lived is this: "What kind of God are we pointing to? What kind of God, when people know us, will they meet? Will it be the God of judgment? Will it be the God of wrath? Or will it be the God of Jesus?" And Elijah said, "If the Lord is God, follow him."

