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“I Am Not Sure About A God Who....” 1. Can’t Seem to Communicate More Clearly

1 Kings 19:9-13a At that place [Elijah] came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." 11 He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Mark 8:27-35 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Like most ministers, my wife Barbara relates how she has found herself in conversation with strangers seated next to her on an airplane, or in a check-out line, or some such, and the person will ask “What do you do?” When Barbara responds “I’m a minister,” it’s not at all unusual for the person to respond “Well, I don’t believe in God.” But Barbara has developed a brilliant and helpful response. She will often say “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” Whereupon the person will describe their understanding of God in some detail. And Barbara then often finds that she is moved to reply: “I don’t believe in that God either.”

It’s the same response that Jesus, in essence, gives to Peter in the story described in our reading from the gospel of Mark this morning. If you remember anything about Mark’s gospel, you may recall that Peter just never comes off very well.

As Mark tells it, Peter continually misses the point. He continually says the wrong thing at the wrong time. He constantly misunderstands Jesus. And, at the end of Jesus' earthly life, he even denies that he knows Jesus at all. But **this** time, you might think, Peter *surely* must have gotten it right. "*Who do people say that I am,*" asked Jesus, and Peter rushes forward and says "*You are the Christ, you are the messiah.*" But does Peter finally get something right with this answer? Apparently not, for Jesus harshly says to him "*No, No, No!*" "*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*"

It is fascinating to look at the differences between scriptures, even when they are telling the same story. One of the reasons that, early on, the Church chose four gospels instead of just one is that each of the gospels has a different "take" on things. But surely, we might protest, how could this statement – "*You are the Christ, you are the Messiah*" – be so right in, say, Matthew's telling of the story and so wrong in Mark's?!? To answer that question, we need to understand something of the religious and political scene of Jesus' day. It was a time when Israel increasingly chafed under Roman rule. It was a time of the growth of factions. Some, like the Zealots, wanted to take military action against the Romans. Others wanted to accommodate the Romans as much as possible so things wouldn't get even harsher. Others probably had no clear-cut strategy for coping – just keep your head down and get by day by day. But everyone hoped for a savior – some way out of this mess.

And one of the ways that many of the people of that day hoped for a savior was to imagine a mighty warrior God who would come in and forcefully right what was wrong, who would use might and power and violence to bring things to be the way they're supposed to be. In Biblical terms it was the hope that somehow a new David, a new warrior and king, would rout the opposition by superior might and finally usher in the Kingdom.

I think that is what Peter wanted to see in Jesus; that was the kind of God he believed in. After all (John 18:10), it was Peter who pulled out his sword in the Garden and began to attack those who had come to arrest Jesus. And so what Jesus knew was that in Peter's statement "You are the Christ, the Messiah" while he had the words right, he, like Barbara's conversation partner, showed that he believed in a God very much different from the one Jesus embodied. For much as Peter might have wanted a mighty, powerful, force-filled God to vanquish all the enemies, Jesus had a different message to share about God. Did you hear what Jesus went on to say in this story? Jesus talks about his own suffering and rejection and death. And then, to accentuate the point, Jesus calls the crowds around him – not just the disciples – and for the very first time begins to speak bluntly and plainly about the gospel that he has come to proclaim, saying that his gospel is not marked by self-seeking but by self-denial. His gospel is marked not by force or ego or might but by God's true power of self-giving love.

Yet I suspect that Peter was still left wondering, as you and I no doubt wonder and as reflected in the title of today's sermon, the first of our new summer sermon series, why God couldn't just be clearer? Why did God's Son speak in parables instead of directly. Why didn't God just send Peter a text message or announce his expectations on a Facebook page? I don't know about you but God sends me no emails (I've even checked my spam folder) and although there is a Twitter user by the name of "God," I really suspect he's an impostor when he Tweets things like "I really regret most of you people." It's one of those questions, indeed, that non-believers ask in the face of what seems to be such un-clarity on God's part and so many interpretations. So, how might we answer these questions? Well, let's turn to our other scripture for the morning, the story of the prophet Elijah at one of the lowest points of his life and we will see that sometimes what we may think of as God's lack of clarity is

actually our looking for God in all the wrong places.

You see, like Peter, Elijah also found himself wanting a different sort of God. Alone in his cave, fleeing the enemies who wanted to kill him, bruised, battered, and feeling sorry for himself, Elijah too was ready for a mighty warrior who would come set things right. He was ready for a God who would act with some pizzazz! And God answered him – but not in the way that he expected. God called him out of his cave, and proceeded to show him a mighty windstorm and then an earthquake and then a roaring fire and each time says, “But God is not there,” God is not in these. Like Elijah, like Peter, you and I too sometimes crave pizzazz, crave something spectacular; like them we too sometimes look for God in the wrong places. I recall driving in Indianapolis one day many years ago and saw a sign in front of a church that said “*Revival. God Speaks Tonight!*” Now that’s spectacular! That’s got pizzazz! And yet, there is something attractive about such a message, such a promise: In the middle of a complex and sometimes crazy world too often painted in shades of gray, there’s something that appeals to us about the idea of such dramatic certainty, such spectacle. And yet, as with Elijah, as with Peter, where should we look for God? Where is God to be found and where are the wrong places to look? How can we truly hear and understand who God really is and what God expects more clearly. Let me suggest three ways that you and I sometimes look for God in the wrong places and thus end up believing in a God, like Barbara’s conversation partner, who is not really God at all.

First, despite your and my craving for clarity, God is not to be found in oversimplistic answers to complex questions. God’s voice is not the same as those voices around us that call to our fears, that blame everything that is wrong on certain kinds of folks. You see, life just is complex and life is ambiguous. And I hate that sometimes. Someone once said that the mark of being a mature adult is to be able to abide in ambiguity. I hate that sometimes! I think we long for simplicity no matter our age. But

simplicity is not the same as simplistic. Each of us here has problems that defy a quick fix. Life takes time and effort and there are no guarantees. And that can get us angry, even resentful. It can certainly dispirit us at times. And that's exactly when we find ourselves ready to listen to the person who would offer slicked-tongued simplicity again. But over-simple answers, as flashy and as full of certainty as they appear to be sometimes, as appealing as they can even be sometimes, can hide God instead of reveal God. I quoted my mother recently, but I'll do so again, "*I've learned that for every question,*" she used to say, "*there is always a simple answer – that is wrong.*" Or, as the story from Elijah might put it, "God was not there...."

Second, you and I sometimes look for certainty and clarity where there is no certainty to be had – and we end up ascribing to God the worst about our lives and our world. But the Bible, throughout both Testaments, has a word for misplaced certainty: it's called idolatry. It's called investing somebody or something with a power over your life that they have no right to have. In its extreme forms it is called fanaticism. It is flashy and full of pizzazz. Yet it ends up mistaking our own worst traits for God. But, as the story from Elijah might have put it, "God is not there."

Third, God is not to be found in those perspectives, those theologies, those political perspectives, those attitudes towards life that say that there is an "us" and there is a "them," and that it is us who is absolutely right. You remember writer Ann Lamott's line? "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." The psychologist Sigmund Freud once ruefully remarked that in his experience, the church wouldn't exist if it didn't have somebody to define as its enemy. And of course the problem with this is that it's not just other people that do this; we do it too. Because – let's admit it – it is attractive. There is something that is, at least superficially, satisfying about writing certain people off. Because you and I have discovered indeed that there are folks we don't like and

who don't seem to like us, folks who annoy us, folks who we think continually get it wrong, folks who even manage to make us mad in just about everything they say. Do you have some of those folks in your life? I would confess that I do, and it is a constant temptation to write them off, make them into completely awful people so that I feel justified in mentally consigning them to the ranks of the "bad" people. But God is not there either. Such attitudes deny the very being of God. Such attitudes are, really, to use the old word, blasphemy, because they say something very untrue about God. Because if God is boundless, unconditional love, then God loves those people who I want to write off. God may not like what those people do – just as I am sure there are times that God doesn't like what I do – but to say that God doesn't really care for some people as much as for other people is to make God too small. The problem isn't God's lack of clarity in communicating; no, again the problem is our mistaking our own worst tendencies for God. And "God was not there...."

So back to our opening questions: How can we better understand what God is trying to communicate? Where do we look for God? What are the *right* places? Well, let us return to both the gospel of Mark and the story of Elijah. In Elijah's telling, God is to be found in quiet words. God is to be found in humble approaches to truth. God is to be found in an attitude of humility. And Mark would agree, I suspect. For as Mark tells the story of Jesus one of the things that comes through again and again and again is God's hope that folks would be healed of what is hurting them. Mark's Jesus moves from healing to healing to healing.

We face an increasingly complex and uncertain world. We find ourselves in the midst of a scary civic season where shouting has replaced civility, hatred seems to trump hospitality, and wariness is beating out a spirit of welcome. Let me say this: if you are asking how you can truly know when it's **not** God communicating, let me suggest a few rules of thumb: when those who purportedly speak in God's name are

unnecessarily shouting, it's probably not of God. When those who purportedly speak in God's name tell you that the answer to most anything is simple it's probably not of God. And when those who purportedly speak in God's name demean, demonize, and disrespect those who are "different," who are the stranger, whose bodies were born differently from the norm, then it's definitely not of God. In the face of such folks, what shall we do? Well, I suggest that we need to make sure that our words, like Jesus' healing words in the Gospel of Mark and like God's voice that spoke quietly to Elijah, are good and generous words. In all our speaking and thinking and acting I would challenge all of us to remember the Rule of St. Ignatius when he said ***"Always exhaust every possible positive interpretation of every person, statement, or event, before assuming the worst."***

There is indeed much negativity around us in the world. There are indeed too many people who are inclined to assume the worst of others instead of the best. I trust and hope and pray that I and we shall never be among them. "For God is not there." God is not there.