

Acts 2:40-47

## What Are You Doing Here?

With so much that has happened in the past few months in our church and in the world, we may be wondering how we should be going about doing church- or better, about being the church- in this place. It seems to me that our spirits are hopeful and true, even if we are a bit anxious about our future. But today, after the church retreat yesterday, is a perfect occasion to begin the conversation about how we perceive ourselves as God's people here, and our hopes for what we may yet accomplish, and our vision of what we should be. And so today, I have dressed for the work ahead. I remember- I think I've told you this story, about that Sunday night I preached in Jamaica- when I arrived, the minister told the congregation how glad he was to welcome me on that "Night for Mission," and said how it looked like I had come ready to get to work, because I was dressed casually, a white knit shirt instead of suit and tie. But the truth is, that white shirt was the nicest thing I had packed. So, today, I'm ready to work, white shirt again, sleeves rolled up, muscles warmed-up and loose- and mind open and alert, I hope, because it's not just physical labor for us, but we must be ready to think and rethink our answer to God's question for Elijah, what we are doing here.

I believe we are at the point of starting over- really, the place of a forced new beginning, so that perhaps yesterday's retreat can represent a kind of watershed moment for us. You likely don't remember- it was a long time ago, nearly nine years ago- that I preached from this Old Testament text, Elijah on the mountaintop seeking God, and I said that it was a moment of revelation, a new understanding of what God is: God in the silence. Think about the appearances of God in the Bible, the epiphanies, the great events- wind and earthquake and fire- that were occasions of God revealing himself: there are dozens of these passages. But here, God is actually proven to Elijah by the fact that God reveals himself as unseen and unfelt and unheard. This is a broader, and a brand new, conception of God as near- and everywhere, terrifying- and comforting.

The thing is, our spiritual sensibilities and expectations are more comfortable with the God of the grand gesture, the God of big moments, and uncomfortable with the mysterious God, the silent God, the God who seems sometimes not to be there. (Be honest, you have known those times when God seems silent, invisible, absent.) But isn't that the point at which faith takes over: when we can't hear or feel or see God, but instead must trust that

God is close. Maybe that is where we are in this present moment. And instead of praying for a big miracle, and some terrific event, we should simply be listening for the voice that asks what we are doing here. And be ready to give an answer, even though it is a difficult question- look, Elijah doesn't have the answer, even after God appears, still he is struggling with it. But even so he is given a work to do, and given this promise, that he is part of the community of God's people.

There are passages in the Bible that recount great changes in the record of the world's history, and in people's understanding of God: think of Noah's flood, the destruction of one age of the world and the creation of a new age; think of the plagues in Egypt and a nation being born in the exodus; think of the Babylonian Exile and the people's suffering, but out of that, a new realization of Israel's God as the true God of all the world; and consider Pentecost and the Holy Spirit's arrival with noise and tongues of fire and foreign languages and conversions. In the New Testament are great events, also, and a new beginning of God and God's people. In the gospels, Jesus calls it the Kingdom of God, in the letters of the apostles, it will be called the church; in our reading, it is this profound sense of fellowship and

the believers' dedication to one another: as verse 44 tells us, those who believed were together and had all things in common.

How are we to understand this? Well, it means they devoted themselves to each other- nothing more. They sold everything and shared all they had? But we know communism doesn't work, so the scripture probably means something else. Understand, this is not a political statement. It doesn't mean they tried socialism, and that didn't work so they moved on to democracy or republicanism, or theocracy and the resultant tyranny of priests and elders and apostles. Politics is not the point, rather here is this new thing: suddenly they perceived God among them, God in the person beside you, God's blessing in the kind and selfless acts for other people; *God delivering people from their hurts and fears, and joining them together as one.* That's the meaning of verse 44- they weretogether; that's the meaning of verse 47- God bringing them together every day, all those who sense God's nearness and healing; that is the reason for their radical and extravagant selflessness: they knew how intimately they had been joined together- God's Spirit moved among them, and they worshipped and ate and rejoiced together, and learned and worked and laughed together.

So there they were, the first citizens of a new age; could have been a frightening thing, one of those impossible, utopian moments that could never last, we think. And yet, it came with a promise, this new vision of God, and a new meaning in human connectedness: it was not a happy-go-lucky feeling of perfect bliss, but rather the comforting assurance that God was with them- God in each heart, God in each humble act of caring, God bringing them so much together that each sacrifice for others was a cause for gladness.

Maybe it helps if we remember God's promise to Elijah, at the end of the Old Testament reading, God's assurance to a man who felt utterly alone: that there were still thousands who gave worship to the true God. Let us keep in mind that are not alone; God is present even in the silence, and we are joined together with those who love- whether few of us or many- and joined with those who perform "great signs and wonders," as verse 43 in Acts has it. But know this, that these great works are not rare miracles, but the everyday fellowship we participate in, the prayers we offer up for others, the giving and receiving of gifts and of love, and the joy we share. These are the mighty works that proclaim God to the world that watches very closely the lives of religious people. Let that be our witness to "this

generation,” so that they may come to have hope by seeing our hope that heals and comforts, and drives us on.

Where we are going, and what we wish to do, is a process. It will take us a while, making plans, working and reworking them. But be encouraged by this, if it seems a long and difficult task, that the last paragraph in Acts 2, verses 43-47, is not the account of what the people did on that Pentecost evening, but a summary of what they were about those first months and years in Jerusalem: a new, gradually developing practice of community, of seeing God at work among a humble, loving people. In this new beginning in Acts is a social reconfiguration (not a political movement, and more social than religious) that crosses every social and economic barrier and places persons over religious mandates; a new community that loves and cares for and accepts every person as God's beloved. Just so for us. Here, I think, is the place for us to start, by reimagining what we are as the church in Belton. This is where we begin in this new age just now upon us: in expanded ways of using this building, and reevaluating our assets and abilities, and in the daily renewal of our commitment to one another; and reminding ourselves

that God demands of us justice and mercy and kindness, much more than perfect rule-keeping; and so, giving worship to our Lord in the quiet service of other creatures.

Of course, it will not be a quick and easy task, but it comes with a promise: of fellowship and shared labor, and God's presence. Are you ready? we can do this. Let's get to work.