

I Kings 19: 5-18

Does God Answer Prayer?

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This month our worship theme is “Life’s Unanswered Questions”. We began the series with a sermon on “Why is it so hard to let go?”. The second sermon was about “What Happens when we die?”. Last week Heike preached on “What good can come out of bad things”. Finally this week we look at the question of prayer. Does God listen to us? Does God hear our prayers? Like all the questions in this series, this one came from the Deacons and from the congregation, as a whole. Many of you had questions about prayer. So, today we ask the fundamental question of whether prayer works, at all. Does God hear us when we pray? How do we know whether God listens to our prayers?

It is not just an academic question. Whether we are conscious of it or not, many of us pray everyday. Whether it is a sigh before an important meeting, a look towards heaven before we take a test, or the pause athletes make when they prepare to make an important play, we all look to God for strength throughout the day. Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebo- has caused a national stir by dropping to his knees whenever he makes a successful pass in a major league football game. It is hard to know what about his faith has caused such a stir. Is it the openness of his devotion? Is it something that smacks of hubris? Is it his implication that God is on his team? But people have noticed his prayers, and they are talking about them.

This week we had a service of healing on Wednesday night. It was a short service in which people were invited to light a candle, and ask for healing prayers for themselves, a family member, or a friend. It always amazes me to think about how brave you have to be to get up out of your seat and walk

to the front of a church, and bare your soul enough to ask for God's help. It takes trust to let somebody else know what you are worried about. It takes faith to ask God to respond to your needs.

The very act of praying raises lots of questions for modern believers. If you pray for something and it happens- is that a sign of God's power? If you pray for a miracle and the person you love is still sick, does that mean your prayers were in vain? What if our prayers don't change anything? What if they just make us feel better? What if God does not listen, or cannot be bothered with our petitions? These are not new worries. Each generation has been troubled by them. Today's Bible story took place 28 centuries ago when Elijah was a prophet in Israel. He was scared and he wanted to know that God heard his prayers in the worst way. Let's take a look. What can Elijah's story tell us today?

In the first place, we all want to make an impact on God. It is human to seek a sign that God is listening. Since the time of Adam and Eve, we try to test God. It is one way to know if God is paying attention.

Elijah set up a demonstration to test God. In those days the queen of Israel worshipped Baal and her husband married YHWH. When Jezebel moved into the palace she brought her own priests. This sparked a lively debate in Israel about whether YHWH or Baal were more attentive. Which god should you trust? So Elijah staged an elaborate showdown with the priests of Baal. He ordered the people to build a huge altar and kill a bull. Then he challenged the worshippers of Baal to pray to their god to light the fire. When they failed at that, Elijah doused the whole altar in water until the wood was thoroughly soaked. Then Elijah asked God to set it on fire. Behold the altar exploded into flames. Then Elijah pressed his advantage against the stunned priests of Baal, and told the crowd to kill them all. In this way, Elijah proved about as dramatically as you can that God listens to the prayers of the faithful. He proved that miracles do happen when we call on God's name.

But when Queen Jezebel heard that her priests were all slaughtered she swore to take revenge on Elijah. Suddenly Elijah was terrified and confused. He fled into the wilderness-headed toward the holy mountain where God gave the 10 commandments. Elijah wondered where God was now. One minutes God sent lightening to ignite the pyre, but when Elijah where was God's protection? He had staked his whole reputation on the showdown with the priests of Baal, but where was God now? He had been loyal to God so where was God's loyalty now?

Those questions ate him up inside. Those questions always do. What is it about faith that works so beautifully at church but slips away in the night when you cannot sleep? What it is about God that seems so close when the miracles are flesh and then wanes on our cold nights in the desert? Where is God when a child suffers? Where is God when mental illness tears up a family? Where is God when people pray about global warming and things do not change?

We want to know. We want to know it all. So we test God. We all do it.

In the second place, God's answers to prayer may not come in the way we expect. When Elijah was weak with anger and running on no food, he lay down in frustration to die. The Bible says an angel came to bring him food and water. Who knows what that means? A caravan passing on the trade route and someone stopped to help? Another traveler saw him? It does not really matter. By using the word angel, the Bible asserts that God sent help. Angel means messenger from God. God intervened to save Elijah's life. God did not kill Jezebel but God did save Elijah, all the same.

So often when we pray, we give God a list, or a petition. But God often comes to us in indirect ways. It may not be what we ask for, but it is often what we need.

You have all heard the story of the man who was in a flood. He prays to God, and someone comes in a boat and offers him a ride. The man refuses because he expects to see God rescue him. Then

someone comes through the neighborhood with a helicopter and urges him to grab a rope and get a taxi to higher ground. But the man refuses because he has been praying and fully expects god to show up to rescue him. Eventually the waters continue to rise and the man drowns. When he gets to heaven he is angry at God. He accuses God of abandoning him. I prayed and you never showed up. God says, “Who do you think sent the boat and the helicopter?” Often God answers our prayers by sending help.

It takes patience to see the mercy in unanswered prayer. It takes great faith to persist in prayer when nothing seems to be going your way. But that is where your faith deepens.

Finally, you will sense your prayers are being answered before you hear God’s voice. You hear God’s answers with your heart more than with your ears.

When Elijah came to the holy mountain he went into a cave. Perhaps he sought safety, or secretly hoping that God would come to him there, which is exactly what happened. But God surprised Elijah. At first Elijah heard a mighty wind; but God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake and Elijah listened, but God was not there either. Then a firestorm broke out in the desert on that mountain, and Elijah listened harder, but there was nothing holy in this fire. After all that, there was a silence that fairly pulsed with God’s breath. Then Elijah knew that God was with him, there in the silence. It is in the silence that God dwells. Often it takes us by surprise because in our busy lives silence is rare.

I will never forget the one time I heard Elizabeth Kubler- Ross speak. She was a small woman who pioneered work with on death and dying. She was invited to give a lecture in Harvard’s Memorial Church, when I was a graduate student. The place was packed, and she was not a public speaker. The pulpit was huge for her small frame, but she mounted the stairs and began her address . Her humility and her quiet voice made her almost inaudible, but no one moved for an hour as she proceeded. The

crowd quieted down to a stillness which is rare, and something holy transpired that day. The silence was alive with a spiritual force.

We stumble into silence some Sunday morning where we are thinking so hard that there is a stillness in this place that morphs into a kind of palpable grace. And God enters this sanctuary ever more clearly. You can hear the silence; it fairly pulses.

Does God answer prayer? We all ask that question at some time in life. We strive to know almost scientifically whether God hears us. Like Elijah we set up tests for God – some are more elaborate than others. But they all come from that young impulse of striving to control God- like we could. If you do this for me then I will believe. If you send lightening now to ignite this pyre then I will know. But like Elijah- so many of us still don't believe that way. When miracles occur and God sends exactly what we ask for, we wonder if God is responsible for these coincidences. Oddly, it is so often in the times when our prayers seem to go unanswered that we groan in the unfairness, and lean on the mystery that is God.

I don't know why it is so. But I have seen it repeatedly in my life and in yours. When I worried most about God's absence if I could stand it long enough to remain at the edge of my cave of disbelief- then in the magnificent silences of life, God was there. Not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, no. When that had all come and gone, and I was alone still in the silence, those moments were holy ones, if I could bear the silence. If you can stand the silence of what you fear may be unanswered prayer – that is precisely where you come close to God and sense that God is coming close to you. Then you know your prayers were heard. Really, that is all you need to know.