

Hard questions

By [Steve Pankey](#)

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As we continue to play around with different ways to make Sunday morning flow better at my church, one of the things we have tried is to “divide and conquer” the receiving line after worship. The preacher heads to the parish hall to say “hello” to everyone staying for fellowship while the celebrant stands by the nearest usable exit to catch anyone heading straight for home, WalMart, or their tee-time. We chose this setup intentionally, thinking that visitors are the most likely to skate out quickly on Sunday. This is especially true for those visitors who aren’t Episcopalians and well versed in the ways and means of the coffee hour. We didn’t want visitors to have to come up with some pithy comment about the sermon, so we put the celebrant at the emergency exit.

Frankly, I find this refreshing. “Good job.” “I liked your sermon.” “Great... ser... vice.” This things can go to your head. Even bad preachers (or good preachers on bad Sundays) hear heaps of praise most Sundays. It has created an American Idol-esque epidemic of preachers suffering from Preaching Ability Dysmorphic Disorder. I’m digressing... PADD is for another day.

Occasionally, after a sermon, I’ll get hit with a tough question. It is usually based on the fact that I don’t give concrete “action steps,” but rather trust the person and the Spirit enough to let them figure out how to love their neighbor or trust in God.

Sometimes, the hard question comes because the promises of God don’t always happen in the time frames we expect. Take, for example, the problem of unemployment. On Valentine’s Day, 2011, CNN Money asked the question, [what is the new normal for unemployment?](#) They ventured a guess of 6.7%. I’ve heard others say 8% is the new normal.

Either way, there is now 2.7 to 4% of the US Population that at one time could find a job, and now cannot. People, unable to move for various reasons, have been unemployed for years. As I read the thematic track [Old Testament](#) lesson for Sunday, I can’t help but wonder how the person in the pew, unemployed for 36 months or more, hears that God woke the distraught prophet, Elijah, up to feed him?

I speak from a position of relative luxury. I've got a full-time job, health insurance, and a pension. My kids are healthy, my marriage is strong, and food is always in the pantry. So, when I preach that "God will provide," I do so, not really knowing what it means to live through extended periods of want. There were times in seminary when the bank account read \$2 and a paycheck wasn't due for 48 hours. There were calls to my bishop, to family, and even once to the Student Aid Society, but even then, God provided, the 48 lapsed, and we were once again able to get to Safeway and secure sustenance.

God's provision is easy to see in the short term, but I can't help but wonder if it rings hollow to those who suffer from chronic hunger, poverty, depression, fear, heartache, or unemployment? What word do we offer them? What comfort is there in the midst?

These are the hard questions I'm pondering today.

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