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Done. You. Have. What. Four simple words, but depending on the order and emphasis of each word, the meaning of the phrase may change. Saying *have you done what* seems out of order and confusing, but rearranging them into the phrase *what have you done* makes more sense. In addition, placing an emphasis on certain words changes the meaning even more.

For example, “*What* have you done?” seems to accuse someone of not completing a job they were supposed to have done.

“What *have* you done?” seems like an invitation for someone to give a list of what one has accomplished.

“What have *you* done?” seems to ask us to personally get involved in doing something to make a difference.

And finally, emphasizing the last word seems to carry a bit of an accusation about doing something wrong: “What have you *done*?” which is the tone I think a mother used when her son came home from school one day soaking wet.

When her son was in grade school, his route home from school each day took him by an irrigation canal. Because it is not uncommon for youngsters to drown in open waterways, he had been instructed repeatedly not to play around the canal on his way home. One afternoon Jimmy came in later than usual. His pants were wet and muddy, and he was carrying his shoes. He obviously had been in the forbidden canal.

His mother asked the expected question: “*What* have you *done*? Have you been in the canal?”

He had obviously prepared himself for this interrogation and answered, “Yes, ma’am, but I didn’t do it on purpose. I just fell in accidentally.”

Based on the evidence at hand, his mother then asked, “How is it that if you fell in accidentally, you didn’t get your shoes and socks wet?” Quick as a wink, he replied, “Well, I just barely had time to get ’em off before I hit the water!”¹

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Although we don't hear the intonation of the biblical writers, I can just imagine the way the questions were asked in this morning's reading from the book of Exodus, for tensions are high when God's people escaped from the Pharaoh of Egypt.

The background of the story might seem somewhat familiar: God's people were slaves in Egypt. God asked Moses to challenge the Pharaoh and demand that he release the people to freedom. The Pharaoh resisted, but after ten plagues that came upon the land, the Pharaoh finally let them all go.

As the newly liberated slaves were leaving the city, I imagine those who depended on all those workers muttered to themselves about the Pharaoh's decision, "What has he *done*? How will we get the pyramids built now without all the people to make bricks? Just what did the Pharaoh have in mind by letting them go?"

The story in Exodus tells us that even Pharaoh and his officials wondered about their decision

when they exclaimed, "What have we *done*, letting Israel leave our service?"

They weren't the only ones who questioned the plan, for as the Israelites found themselves in the wilderness and saw the Pharaoh's army approaching, they cried out to Moses, "What have you *done*, Moses, bringing us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness? We told you this wouldn't work. It would have been better to stay where we were rather than die out here!"

Have you ever been unhappy about where you were in life, and when a change comes that has the potential of improving your life, you face some difficulties? Then you get nostalgic for that place you wanted to leave, for now it doesn't seem so bad? We tend to complain, don't we? It's often difficult to be content where we are at the time, and we often spend a lot of energy stewing about our situation.

Moses had a suggestion for them, "Do not be afraid. God will assist us. Keep still."

That's hard to do: to keep still in the midst of the turmoil of life. I remember walking into a church

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sanctuary years ago and reading similar words painted on the wall that offer the same suggestion from Psalm 46:10: “Be still, and know that I am God!”.

We’ve heard the rest of the story in Exodus, how Moses led the people through dry land across the sea bed, and after they had escaped, the Pharaoh’s army entered the dry pathway, only to find their wheels getting stuck in the mud, horses getting confused, waters rushing back into the dry bed, tossing and turning the chariots that broke apart and sank in the waters.

As the Egyptians drowned in the sea, I sometimes wonder if God ever thought, “What have I done?” That’s a question the rabbis may have asked as well, for in a collection of legends called the *Ha-aggadah*, the guardian angel of Egypt questioned why God was planning to drown the Egyptians. God asked all the heavenly beings to gather to make a judgment, and the angel Gabriel went down to the earth and brought back a brick with its clay encasing a dead infant who had been buried alive. Gabriel said, “Master of the Universe,

this did the Egyptians enslave your children.” And then the waters rushed over the Egyptians. Just as one of the angels was ready to break out in celebration, God rebuked the angel and said in regard to the drowning of the Egyptians, “The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter song in My presence?”²

Since all people are God’s children, not only did God grieve the enslavement and oppression of the Israelites, but God also mourned the death of the Egyptians.

That may be hard for *us* to understand, for we often want to take sides, lining up the good guys against the bad guys. We stand by cheering for those on *our* side, never thinking about the perspective of the others. Even within our own communities, we have a tendency to label as “other” those who may differ from ourselves, not taking the time to get to know them. Whether it’s due to different religions, colors of skin, lifestyles, wealth, or other differences, we often avoid getting to know others. But as this week’s Reconciliation offering reminds us, we help fund churches to build bridges

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between people of differing colors, those trying to tear down the walls of racism by helping people get to know one another better.

I sometimes wonder if God might ask of us, “What have *you* done...to get to know my other children?”

That’s something Grace Lutheran Church down the street here in Elkhart decided to find out. Craig and his wife, the organist of the church, wanted to find a way to get to know those in their neighborhood. They said, “Just go two blocks and there’s shootings, knifings, killings, drug overdoses. We are trying to change the neighborhood. We thought about moving...We’re going to make it better.”

The couple bought and refurbished band instruments and gave them to children who could

not afford to buy them. “We were going to abandon this building to the cockroaches and let them have it, then I thought, this is our mission. We are going to change the community with these instruments.” When accepting an instrument, students also sign a pledge: “to stay out of trouble, maintain good grades and play their instrument as long as they are in school.”³

I don’t think God will ask the people of this Lutheran congregation, “What have you *done*? But if God does ask this congregation, “What have *you* done to make a difference in the world?” the sounds of music will fill the heavens.

What have *you* done?

¹ Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 2289-2296). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #278 (adapted).

² *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-aggadah*, Hayim Hahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., p73, #86.

³ Joselyn Ellington, “Church blesses students with free instruments,” *The Elkhart Truth*, September 23, 2018, A1.