

“Deep, Down Questions”

I Kings 19: 1-15a, Luke 8: 26-39

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time/C, June 24, 2007

Lynne M. Dolan

Is God calling you? The answer is yes indeed!! If so, to what is God calling you? After hearing this morning's lesson about Elijah, you may be reluctant to answer that question too quickly. Callings are not reserved for special people like ministers or doctors or teachers or missionaries. Furthermore, prophets come along more frequently than you might believe and it is possible that you may be the next great prophet. Even when you feel “called” to undertake some particular ministry, like teaching Church school or singing in the choir or leading a mission trip, that hardly seems to qualify as a “calling.” So, what does calling look like for ordinary folk? Many people try to steer clear of this calling business. If today's story is any indication, answering God's call can get you into a lot of hot water, and who needs that aggravation.

We find Elijah this morning, wondering why he bothered to answer God's call. He is running from angry Queen Jezebel. Apparently he came out on the winning end of a contest between prophets. Her prophets of Baal are all dead and now she has threatened to do to Elijah what he has done to them. It is time to “get out of Dodge, while the getting is good!” Elijah flees to a desolate cave, to hide, lick his wounds and wallow in self-pity.

When it seemed like Elijah had run out of steam, when he was run dry and run down, he prayed: “God, just let me die. I am through. I can't do the things you think I can do. Regardless of how hard I try and how faithful I am, I am a failure.” Elijah falls asleep, hoping never to awaken because all he envisions for his future is a mountain of insurmountable challenges. Instead, he is awakened by an angel, who tells him the pity party is over and he needs to make a spiritual journey. God gives Elijah what he needs to make

this forty day and forty night journey of renewal. God sends him deeper into the wilderness, lonely but never alone, then up onto another mountaintop, to receive God's guidance and wisdom.

Elijah travels to Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai as many people know it. It is the place where Moses received the Law and more significantly, where he met God. Laurence Farris says that "nothing insignificant happens on mountaintops in Scripture... What begins as flight from a tyrant soon becomes a journey to God led by God." (The Lectionary Commentary, Roger E. Van Horn, ed.) In other words, Elijah wasn't just running away from Jezebel, he was running from his calling, he was running away from God. Farris suggests that the tension in the narrative is between whether Elijah will be defined by his fear of Jezebel or his faithfulness to God.

God finally asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" In other words, how can you be doing what I have called you to do if you are not where I have sent you? "What are you doing here, Elijah?" John Thomas, the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, suggests this deep question is not curiosity, it is challenge. How can you be about the business to which I have called you if you are hiding in the darkness? How can you do what I have sent you to do if you don't believe in the power to get it done? It is hard to be about God's business if you spend all your time avoiding God. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It is a logical enough question, after all.

Elijah's response is all too human. He believes he has done what God has asked of him, he has been faithful, indeed, in his words, and he has been zealous. However, in his faithfulness he has managed to anger Ahab and Jezebel and put his life at risk. He would rather live the rest of his life in a cave or even die in his sleep, than go back and continue to serve God. Hiding in fear of an angry queen is not the future he envisioned for himself. Furthermore, he presumes he is the only one left who is faithful.

Have you ever had one of those days? I imagine few of us will ever find ourselves hiding in a dark cave with a death threat hanging over our heads. However, at one time or another, our prophetic voice may have gotten us into hot water and we'd just as soon hide out for awhile. Perhaps you have said what needed to be said among your siblings who are making difficult decisions for an elderly parent and now they are angry with you. Perhaps you were a "whistle blower" at work, bringing to light wrongdoing for the good of many, but to your own detriment. There are times when we face the same challenge as Elijah. Will we be defined by our fear of whatever the circumstance may be, or by our faithfulness to God?

When God asks Elijah twice why he is there and not where he should be, Elijah answers with what could be classified as a first rate, self-righteous whine. He says, "I have been working so hard and trying to do the right thing, and those people have totally abandoned you, and I'm the only one left who is faithful, and I'm all alone, so just kill me now." Whoa, Elijah, slow down. When we find ourselves in trouble and we're sprinting for safety it is easy to look behind and see only the dust of our own two feet. Where are the others who promised to stick by you? Where are the ones who supported your vision? Are you the only faithful one left? The others seem to be long gone and now it is only you, wondering why you ever let God talk you into this crazy call thing in the first place.

It is sometimes lonely answering God's call. I have found this to be true from time to time in ministry. You know that your mental and spiritual well being depends on your having a strong circle of friends, but when do you have time to nurture friendships or make new friends. You understand that people in your church can not really be your "friends" when you need to be their minister, but what happens when you are in crisis and you realize you were so

busy taking care of others you did not take time to care for yourself. If you made a list of the challenges that ministry presents and the joys it offers, you might say no to God before you ever accepted the call. It is natural to feel this way; to be depressed, to feel overwhelmed, to wonder why you are doing this. I imagine this happens for many people in all kind of professions. It is easy to feel you are out on a limb when you are the manager of big project and all the criticism comes your way. As a nurse or doctor, it is easy to be overwhelmed by suffering and death and wonder why you continue to do this work. Perhaps it feels as though tragedy overshadows the healing and simple miracles you experience every day. I don't feel depressed or overwhelmed every day, but when I do, it can cast a mighty large shadow.

Remarkably, though Elijah is weary and depressed, he still trusts God. His anger and depression, like our own, are temporary. Ultimately, he listens to the angel that calls him to get up and eat and to do what is necessary to sustain himself for the forty-day journey God is calling him to make. He can't make it without this sustenance and he can't continue his prophetic ministry without making this journey. When the journey ends, Elijah arrives at Mt. Horeb where a voice gives him new instructions. He must now stand on the mountain where the Lord is about to pass by. There comes a mighty wind and after the wind, an earthquake and after the earthquake a fire, but God was in none of these. After the fire, Scripture says there was the sound of sheer silence. It was in the silence that Elijah feared he would find God.

So often that is true for us as well. We think God will make Godself known in some dramatic way like a rushing wind or an earthquake. We don't imagine we will encounter God in something as simple yet profound as silence. However, that is almost always where we meet God. Some call this the still small voice of God, however, I prefer the sheer silence. A still, small voice implies God is speaking but perhaps I just can't hear it.

Finding God in the sheer silence is not just listening for a voice, but expecting an encounter. If I am constantly in motion, I will simply shatter this sheer silence. If I am constantly talking, I can not hear this sheer silence. That is why prayer and meditation is so essential for our spiritual well-being. That is why after many years of faithful work, a sabbatical, an invitation to the sheer silence, will likely sustain and empower a lengthy pastorate. That is why we invite one another to a time of silence whenever we pray in worship. It is not enough for Dick or me to pray, for us to articulate the joys and concerns that have been spoken aloud. We need time of sheer silence. It is in this silence that we meet God.

Elijah thought he was alone, that there were no more faithful people left. Of course, he was wrong. In fact, God told him there were 7,000 faithful ones, and before long, Elisha becomes his companion and protégé. He was never alone. Once Elijah recognized God in the sheer silence he was ready to go back to complete the ministry God intended for him, despite the consequences. We are never alone. There are always others who are faithful and courageous and willing to answer God's call. In just a moment we will commission more than 70 faithful ones that fit this description. First, we will proclaim together our UCC Statement of Faith. These promises will be like the food that fed Elijah on his wilderness journey. We have no idea what we will encounter in Washington, DC or Staten Island, NY, but we are ready to go. We will bring what we need to sustain us physically for the journey and God will provide what we need to sustain us spiritually. The work may be difficult. The challenges may be many, but we are ready. We can fulfill God's call if we take time to experience the sheer silence throughout our busy week. We may not be 7,000, but with the hopes and prayers of this community to sustain us, we will do the work of 7,000 faithful. It is time to leave the cave, to enter into the sheer silence and encounter the Holy One. May it be so!! Amen