

“Listening for the still, small voice”

1 Kings 19:3-12

Anne M. Cameron

July 20, 2008

Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

Fourth in a series on “*A Vision for Ministry*”

Before listening for God’s still, small voice in scripture, it is important we recall the events leading up to this story. Because in 2008 we can no longer assume a certain level of biblical knowledge. So today we make no assumptions. You may remember the background to today’s story. But if you don’t. . . .we will get everyone up to speed. You don’t have to feel you have to know the Bible backwards and forwards to know what it is we are talking about.

Here’s what led up to this particular story of Elijah running away. It is one of the more dramatic events in the Old Testament, the triumph of the prophet Elijah over the prophets of Baal.

Elijah proposed a contest between the pagan god Baal and Israel’s God, Yahweh. The people of Israel and the many prophets of Baal gathered at Mount Carmel. Two altars were built, one for Baal and one for Yahweh. Wood was laid on the altars. Two oxen were slaughtered and cut into pieces; the pieces were laid on the wood. It was, you might say, a kind of barbeque cook off, no, maybe more like a Superbowl for the gods, to see whose god would triumph.

Elijah then invites the priests of Baal to pray for fire to light their sacrifice. This is where the power of the gods comes in. They pray from morning to noon without success. Elijah ridicules their efforts. They respond by cutting themselves and adding their own blood to the sacrifice. They continue praying until evening without success.

Elijah now orders that the altar of Yahweh, and its sacrifice, be drenched with not one, not two, but twelve barrels of water. He asks God to accept the sacrifice. Fire falls from the sky, igniting the whole wet mess. The people who witness this immediately begin worshiping Yahweh. They are convinced beyond a doubt of the power of Israel’s God. Elijah seizes the moment and orders the death of the prophets of Baal.

Having just triumphed in his contest over hundreds of the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, politics meets religion and Elijah incurs the wrath of Queen Jezebel (who favors the god Baal). He soon finds himself the subject of a death warrant. Now we come upon Elijah as he tries to escape into the wilderness.

Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

The prophet Elijah is worn out. He is terrified, he is alone, and he is in need of the refreshment only God can provide. So he flees into the wilderness, fearing for his very life. He travels quite a distance, about as far south as he can go and still be in Israel.

Elijah is used to experiencing God in dramatic ways: through miracles. There are miracles of provision (the unending supply of oil and flour in the home of the widow of Zarephath), miracles of healing (Elijah is one of the few human beings God uses to bring the dead to life), and miracles defying nature, one of which we just heard about. But Elijah, as he withdraws into the desert wilderness, ends up experiencing God not in these powerful, dramatic ways, but rather in the sound of sheer silence.

The sound of silence. Described as a ‘thin whisper’ or a ‘faint murmur’ or a ‘still, small voice’. Hardly what we (or Elijah, for that matter) might expect from the all-powerful Yahweh.

It is difficult to stop and be still, to listen for God’s voice in the noisiness of our lives. We rarely seek silence. Most of us don’t know how to be silent. We look for big signs or dramatic conversions. We are interested in the seven quick and easy steps to discipleship. We are less excited about what Friedrich Nietzsche called a “long obedience in the same direction”.¹

Some of us just want to show up for worship and get our weekly dose of the deity. Many of us do not have a clue about how to deepen our relationship with God. We are not in the habit of listening, the habit of being quiet, the habit of prayer and meditation, indeed the habits of discipleship which can both nurture our relationship with God and fuel our ability to respond as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Some of us may never have been taught or mentored in how we can develop these habits.

David Jones, a professor at Austin Seminary, says, “Authentic discipleship is not some lofty Christian ideal etched on a mission statement, nor some creed [people] feel bound to follow. Rather, it appears to be *a way of being in life* that [gets into people’s] spiritual DNA. . .and now orders their lives.”²

I like the image of spiritual DNA because it underlines the very fundamental process by which discipleship takes hold of us. Once we develop these habits, once we grow in discipleship, once we catch it, once it becomes a part of our spiritual DNA, we cannot help but live out our lives in service to the One who calls us to discipleship.

There is no ending discipleship. It’s not something anyone achieves, like a degree or a stage in life. It is not an endpoint, but a process. It is not an accomplishment, but a way of being. Discipleship never ends. You can no more retire from being a disciple than you can retire from being a human being.

As we have been seeking God’s vision for Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church in the next decade of our lives together, the

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cited in Eugene Patterson’s book “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction”.

² David Lee Jones, “On Being (not becoming) a Disciple” in The Living Pulpit, April-June, 2008, p. 7.

leadership of this church is convinced that God desires our congregation to grow in discipleship, and to use that growth to draw others to Christ. This is Jesus' Great Commission, which has been part of this church's written mission statement for the past decade.

“Go and make disciples. . . .”

Last Saturday when we spent the day in retreat together, the leaders of the church agreed that in the next decade our church community needs to make the shift from *assuming* discipleship to nurturing and *developing* disciples.

The word disciple comes from the Latin *discipulus*, which means a pupil or apprentice. The very word connotes discipline, learning, modeling, practice. The principles which help people develop discipleship are probably not all that different than they were during the time of the very early church.

The manner, the method, or the way we nurture those habits may need to be very different for the church of the next decade.

When we were together last Saturday, the question was posed, “What about those people who simply want to come and worship and do nothing else in the life of the church?” You could feel the unease in the room. You could sense there were leaders who simply do not want to offend the quiet, anonymous worshipper.

Friends, the Christian life **is** offensive! It is not easy. It is costly. It is not quick. But isn't this true of anything in life that is worthwhile? Imagine if you only devoted one hour a week to an important relationship in your life. You can imagine what a shambles that relationship would be! It is not possible to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and simply put in one hour a week.

You may feel you have already done your job as a Christian. So many of you have done so much. Or you may be reluctant to dive in any deeper than you already have. We are living in an age of instant gratification and superficial relationships. Much of what we do in our lives remains at a pretty superficial level, and it is easy to be that way with our faith.

Or you may simply be worn out, wanting to flee from God, wanting God to put an end to all the struggle. If you feel this way, you are in good company. If you feel this way, take heart. Remember Elijah. Remember Christ. Even Christ asked that his cup of suffering be taken from him.

Part of the power of the community is that we can build each other up. We can pool our wisdom. We can create new ways of helping each other deepen our discipleship. We can hold each other accountable. We have a lot of work to do, there is no doubt. Many of the structures of the past no longer work to nurture new disciples. We need new structures, but God will help us figure that out. God will provide, but first we must listen.

Each one of us must listen for the still, small voice---the calling voice of God. The still, small voice that raises questions, that challenges us to discover new seasons of discipleship, new habits, new practices, new ways to learn and to teach, new ways to grow more deeply. There is peace, and joy, and calm in that still, small voice. Listen for it.