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Message)**

1Kings 19:1-15 (The

SMALL TALK

I have in my 41 years been a dishwasher, a movie store clerk, a pizza maker, a fry cook, a warehouse worker, a cashier, a hotel desk clerk, a job trainer, a bookstore manager, a carpenter's assistant, a software instructor, a business analyst, a PC tech, a project manager and a preacher. But I have never considered myself a prophet...prophetic at times, maybe, but certainly not full time.

Prophets, you know, have a tough job. Oh, it isn't brain surgeon or kindergarten teacher, but the idea that it is your job to tell people in power that what they are doing, which they usually believe to be totally endorsed by God, is, in fact, deplored by God and is not only challenging but usually comes with a very short term in office...and not because you are voted off the island.

Elijah is getting a full dose of this "prophetic hospitality" from Queen Jezebel and he heads for the hills...not a bad plan considering that she is promising to introduce him to the business end of a sword. Still, as far as he runs from the situation, he never leaves it. When God asks "Why are you here?", Elijah lists for God the same complaints against Israel that he has been voicing to the Israelites all along. So he has run far away – 40 days and nights away – but hasn't really left.

So what is it that keeps Elijah, even at the threat of his life, committed to his cause? Well, the technical term is a "calling". This is the language that is used for seminary students and those of us who are officially "in ministry". It means that we feel called by God to do a certain thing. It carries a sense of compulsion or obligation and that term is typically now relegated to the realm of ministers or priests. What it really means is a sense of purpose.

At times I have been uncomfortable using this term – that I am "called". Yet, it's the only term that really works. What gets me out of bed for that 3 a.m. call? What makes me place myself in the forefront of every board and committee trying to guide the church community? What makes me want to write a 10 page essay every week...and then get up in front of a bunch of people and deliver it? It's not just obligation, it is a calling. But I happen to think that lots of people are

called. In fact, I think that *everyone* is called – some of us ignore it, some of us are oblivious to it, and some of us are foolish enough to actually pursue it.

There are times when I feel like ministry is absolutely what I have to be doing and times that I think I'm not cut out for this at all. If we're really fortunate, our calling and our profession are at least parallel, and sometimes even synonymous, but quite often our sense of purpose doesn't coincide with what we are doing and God in her infinite wisdom leaves us that little conundrum in which to live our lives. That is part of what a faith life is, trying to intersect the lines of what I want to do and what will fulfill the often challenging sense of purpose I have.

We have this habit of making small talk by asking people what they do. Sometimes we caveat that by asking what they do for a living, but the question is still really how do you occupy your time? Even when we answer in the standard format all of our lives by giving our profession (until we retire) and then saying "I'm retired", I think we all do that with a little hesitancy. Because, after all, that's not what we *do*, it's just what we do. The surface answer (sales, medical technician, waitress, student, mechanic) is not nearly encompassing enough to address what is under the surface (I seek, I wonder, I sing, I raise and nurture things, I love, I connect, I learn). Just like when someone says, "Hi, how are you?" they don't really want to know that you are tired and your knee hurts, when we say "What do you do?" we aren't looking for your calling, just an answer to keep the small talk moving. That's why it's called small talk...it is about small things. And a calling is not small - it is something that keeps you up at night and is unsettling at times and yet the most rewarding thing you do.

Yet our small talk and our big talk are linked. Here in this place we use the small talk of "all are welcome" or that we are "open and affirming". It sounds lovely...has a nice ring to it. Yet we all know that there are times where we fall far short of that intent goal, where our big talk of actual action reflects closed doors at best and insincerity at worst. We are all human beings here trying to live out in our faith lives a very challenging goal. And often we fall short, in this place and in the world at large. It doesn't take a long look outside to see some pretty serious ways in which our small talk of care for our environment or peaceful co-existence is not being met with big talk.

The acoustic study of this space revealed that we have about 20 decibels of ambient noise going on at any time. The heating and air units, the fluorescent lighting, it all adds up. The human ear needs about 11 decibels over ambient noise in order to hear a phrase or note clearly. That's why when I whisper into the mic, you may not hear this clearly because it is less than 11 decibels over the ambient noise.

Maybe that's how we think that big talk needs to be – loud. So when the diagnosis comes, or the pink slip or the anxious moments of our lives rise to flood stages, when we fail miserably to uphold any of our promises...that's when we expect the hurricane winds, the earthquakes, the raging fires. Big talk is supposed to be loud, right? It is supposed to be miraculous and awe-inspiring. Yet God comes at this biggest moment in Elijah's life way below the decibel threshold. God is quietly present, maybe in ways that Elijah doesn't even realize quickly. And when he finally hears it, he covers his own mouth...you don't get to be a good prophet without knowing

when to preach and when to be quiet. And when you actually realize that you are experiencing God, often silence is the best response.

Elijah is looking for a way out of the stress, and yet the big answer screams at him with its silence. Elijah, bless his heart, he really doesn't get it in this passage. When God asks him what he is doing on this mountain so far away from his work, Elijah answers the same thing twice. Even after the special effects show followed by that still, small voice...even after hurricane and fire with no presence of God followed by a quiet voice, Elijah answers the same thing. He has big problems but he's looking for small answers.

We all, at times, encounter resistance. It usually doesn't come in the form of death threats, but our existential existence is often threatened by the wide gap between what we are called to do and what we want to do. Our loyalties can be tested, our priorities skewed...often we are trapped between what is right and what is easy. And when we are faced with those hard places, it is very tempting to head for the hills...to run far away to the mountain and hide. It's easier than making a choice or facing our anxieties.

And yes, there are times when we want God to come in a terrible earthquake or a raging wind and level the opposition we feel...to burn to ashes that apprehension that is robbing us of our life. So we wish for miracles, we hope for cosmic signs of great magnitude...anything to break the grip of the sadness and despair that has latched onto us. And, perhaps after we get over that, we hear that small voice that was drowned out by our boisterous lament. It reminds us that a model was sent, several models in fact, and they all came to show us our humanity in its truest form. That voice might tell us about Jesus once again, the one who was so fully human that the things he did seemed miraculous. It reminds us that he did not shrink from pain, did not retreat from the very things that make us human, he embraced even the most broken and shattered lives. And then it gently asks, "Now, why are you here?"

Following God's call for us, even in the harsh and by our measurements brutal ways that the Hebrew stories portray it, is a heavy burden. As he sits under the tree and asks for death it is obvious that Elijah is overwhelmed, and death is preferable to what he faces, to what he has to do, to his tasks...to his calling. But when he asks for death in the Hebrew language it is clear that the author is having Elijah's words echo another famous prophet, Moses, who also sits in the desert full of apprehension and doubt and asks for God to take him to his ancestors.

God does not fulfill the request with either Moses or Elijah, nor does God scold them. God actually challenges them more fully. For Elijah there is a series of epiphanies...his perspective is strongly challenged, and a lesson is offered to him; but he is never rebuked for showing weakness. He tells God that he has been zealous for him, working his heart out for God and yet is still in peril, still scared and feeling alone. Elijah is discovering what many of us know, that sometimes when we follow our bliss with absolute dedication we don't find peace, we find chaos. We find ourselves wondering what the heck is going on and questioning everything. And what that gentle whisper is saying is that even if Elijah gives up on his calling, God is not giving up on him.

Elijah, God seems to say, I cannot rescue you from your work with some dramatic display. That's not how I operate. A calling is inherently a challenge. If it were easy it would just be a chore. Small talk is easy, but this is big talk. I can't pull you away from the pain and risk because that is your work. That's where you are called. I can't pull you to me because that's where I am...with you in that same peril. So go back. When I asked you what you were doing here, I wasn't asking for a reprisal of current events, I was asking what *you* are doing *here*...your work is over there.

Our small talk often finds us wishing ourselves out of the situations we're in. It talks of ideals when we are buried in details. It finds us afraid and unsure about our next steps...hoping for something to rescue us...searching for God as if God were on a mountaintop very far away. But our calling isn't far away...it's right here, right now. "Why are you here?", God asks Elijah. God calls us to be love in the very moment, the very place where we are...not to practice for some time when we'll really need it, but to be love for this present moment. Our calling, as it turns out, is often closer than we think.

Elijah was at his wits' end. Maybe he was dreaming of those pre-prophet days when he didn't have to deal with so much turmoil. He had just put himself completely out on a limb and now the power that he had spoken so much truth to was hot on his heels. This was a matter of life or death. Those times have a way of clarifying things – of making distinct what is important to us. Even when we're talking about existential life and death, those moments of high stress knock us off our axis, they change our perspective as they change Elijah's. They make us question our place in the world and fill us with profound doubt about our abilities. We are, as it turns out, far more like Elijah that we'd like to admit. Faced with the newness of unexpected challenges, confronted by the worst case scenarios or the terminal forecast, we often don't find strength, but doubt about whether we're cut out for this sort of thing.

God is telling Elijah to go, to move ahead. He doesn't have to know how it will all work out, he doesn't even have to think that it is. A calling is something that is lived out in small chunks anyway and really only peripherally connected to our abilities, because one of the things that happens when we are fortunate enough to discover our calling is we discover that it isn't about *what* we do but *how* we do it. Thoreau once said, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing it is not fish they are after."

Once you accept that your calling is to be an agent of God's love in the world, you discover that you can do that waiting tables or preparing taxes or building houses or doing the laundry....you can do that holding a new baby or sitting at a hospital bedside. It's not what we do, but how we do it. "Elijah", God says quietly, "What are you doing here?" Frankly Elijah has come to the mountain because his zealousness has failed, at least the way he sees it. He was supposed to go toe-to-toe with the worshippers of Ba'al and at the end of that he expected everyone to turn to the One True God. Instead he runs for his life. So when God asks what he is doing here, Elijah answers with what he is has done. But God is asking what are you doing *here*...because there's no way you can be who you need to be here, you have to be there.

There is an old proverb that says God sent some angels to a kingdom to tell a king and a peasant that God wished to become visible to them. The angels came to the king and said, “God has chosen to be revealed to you in whatever manner you wish. How would you like to see God?” Well, the king was an arrogant man and he said, “How else would I wish to see God except in power and majesty? Show God to me in the fullness of power.” God granted the wish and appeared as a brilliant bolt of lightning, instantly pulverizing the king and his entire court. Everything was vaporized.

The angels then went to the peasant and asked him how he wished to see God made visible. He was puzzled. He paused and thought and finally said, “I am a poor man, not worthy to see God face to face. But if this is God’s will then let God be revealed to me in those things I know. Let me see God in the earth I plow and the water I drink. Let me see God in the faces of my family and friends and neighbors – and, if God thinks it good – in my own reflection as well.

We can be very surprised by where God shows up in our lives and how quiet God’s presence can be. Often God is present so quietly that the hum of our own fear and anxiety drowns God’s voice out. So busy running small talk through our heads, worrying about what we’re doing we forget to think about how we’re doing what we happen to be doing right at that moment. We play out the grand statements of our faith so often that we can forget to actually live them. That still, small voice is there to remind us that every moment is a chance for us to choose kindness over meanness, and to recognize in the people we encounter the face of God.

Faith stems from the trust that God is with us in all things, even when we expect a hurricane and only get a whisper...even a whisper we don’t hear for a long time...even a whisper that, at least for now, does nothing to change our answer to God’s question...but that question lingers in the background, calmly asking us in the midst of our doubt and our fear about how we will get through the next day, much less the next week...tell me, the voice says, ”Why are you here?”

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