

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector on Sunday, 27 June 2010, the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost. To God be the glory.*

Among the privileges of priesthood is listening with people to discover God's call. During Christianity's first centuries "to be called" meant that one was called to be a Christian. People didn't have a choice about what kind of work they would do, or with whom they'd spend time, or where they would live.

By the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire suddenly it was easier to be a Christian, but some of the original followers didn't think that was so good. So they became ascetics, denying as many human comforts as possible, assuming there was something to be gained by such behavior. Some of them did this in groups, and monasteries were born (William Placher, *Callings*).

It wasn't until the Reformation when people began to ask again the question, "if you're not called to a professional religious life, then what?" This coincided with theologians speaking about the importance of faith as opposed to works, and so it made sense that God's call wasn't framed in terms of what you choose to *do*, but rather that you're called by God *to be God's beloved*. Okay. Well enough and good, you say, but how do I do that?

Meet Elijah, and Elisha. We're in the middle of this mini-series, today's episode tells how Elijah's mantle is passed to Elisha. Sometimes the call happens in a dramatic way, as it did for Elisha, with the water parting and the path revealing itself with great clarity.

But turn back to last week, to our first encounter with Elijah. He was burned out, completely spent. He'd gotten a death threat from the queen, and so he left. It's the ancient equivalent of having a really bad day at work during which you get up from your desk at 2:00 p.m., take a cab to Logan, and buy a ticket on the first plane going anywhere far away from here. When Elijah got there, he sat down under a tree and cried.

This is where the well-known part of the story starts: an angel visits Elijah and tells him to go to a mountain, the same mountain where tradition says Moses met the Lord. While Elijah is there, there is a great wind, but God is not in the wind; an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake; and a fire, but God is not in the fire. And then *there is a sound of sheer silence*. This well-known passage of scripture misleads, however. Some of us think that all we need to do is listen closely enough, and then God will speak clearly in a still small voice. God will tell us what to do. Read more carefully. The passage says nowhere that God was in the silence. God doesn't provide a direct answer to Elijah's doubts and questions. When God speaks to Elijah, God doesn't fix his old problems, God simply expects Elijah, and then before long, Elisha, to accept the call of faithfulness.

You see faithfulness is every Christian's responsibility. Each of us is called to stand up against the tyrants of the world and work for justice for all people. The revolutions which have made life better for people, including the ones in our own country, are largely because of Christian claims to tend to the welfare of our neighbor; it's a call given to all.

There's another call given to all, different from revolutionizing. In the shadow of our complex, postmodern lives we finally come to understand the beauty of the medieval calling to a Christianity of prayer and contemplation. The true calling of monks and nuns was to spend life preparing themselves for death, and in this respect, they understood the big picture much better than many of us.

If you've come here this morning with some anxiety about your call, or if you wonder who you're supposed to be in relationship with God, don't let those questions, however good they might be, keep you from setting aside time to praise the one who placed you in this world. We're all called to care for our neighbor, and every Christian is called to pray. If you like recipes: I recommend 20 minutes each day, mixed with one hour of direct service each week, and 1 hour of corporate worship...what you're doing right now.

It's a challenge. Like those first Christians, we live in a world where Christianity is not the official religion. It's no longer the 1950s. We have to work out God's call in every sphere of our lives, and chances are good we'll do that surrounded by people who don't share, or don't know, our beliefs. That's how it was in the early church.

In short, Christians are called to live lives that enable others to see how we love God, and how we love one another. That's our calling, and we can do it whether we're employed, or retired, volunteering, or laid-off. Why? Because we profess that God first loved us.

God loved first, the God who met Elijah in his sadness and depression, was the God who sent an angel to offer him comfort, and God is the same Being who comes to us in the saving work of Jesus the Christ. Your call, and my call, are less about what we do, and much more about how we demonstrate that we're following Christ. In my life the best part about following Christ--living my call--is the reminder that God loves me. I pray that's true for you as well. And if you really don't know what your vocation is, start your discovery with Walter Brueggemann's words: "A vocation is a purpose for being in the world that is related to the purposes of God." In the name of God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, Amen