

"Listening for the Voice of God"
1 Kings 19:1-15a

June 19, 2016
Galatians 3:23-29

New Horizons Presbyterian
Luke 8:26-29

"What are you doing here?" Elijah heard that question from the voice of the Lord, not once but twice. That is the question before this congregation in this time of transition.

There are many ways to listen. We listen to our doctors, teachers, and people giving us direction intently; eager to grasp all the details and specifics. Sometime we listen to acquire information that will shape our own view and the argument we wish to make. Other times we want to become clear about expectations or activities so as to fulfill our role effectively.

Then there is the careful listening of sensitivity - longing to hear the emotion, the pain, and even the joy being expressed. In these moments we are seeking to pick up signals as to the appropriate response to make. The aim is always to express genuine concern or interest in the individual or issue.

Still other times our listening is less active. We catch a bit of a news broadcast as we are preparing a meal or carrying out of household task. We overhear conversation of people in the hallway or next room, or the sounds of children playing nearby. This listening often does not require direct engagement, but may provide an appreciation of what is going on with others.

Elijah thought he had been paying attention and listening to God and God's messenger. He had followed God's direction and been faithful in his task of calling his people to return to Yahweh. Now Jezebel was out to get him. He was more than a little afraid. He fled to a safe place, to get some rest; the desert of Beersheba (still in Judah). He approached God in prayer: "I've done my best, but I have failed my ancestors. Take my life. I am ready to die." He then fell asleep under a broom tree. (reminiscent of Job - often the only source of shade in the desert)

Elijah was wakened by an angel and given food and drink - commanded to get up and eat. He obeyed and promptly went back to sleep. The messenger returned with the same command, urging him to continue his journey. Elijah ate and drank. He felt refreshed. He continued on for forty

days and forty nights - another parallel in Hebrew history. Finding a cave he slept again.

The Lord spoke to him directly: "What are you doing here?" Elijah told his sad story: of his proclamation of God's call to his people and establishment of altars for worship; their rejection of his word and turning away from Yahweh. "I am all alone in this; and they're coming after me."

Elijah got no sympathy. A new command came: "Go out and stand --- the Lord is passing by." Hovering just inside the cave Elijah experienced strong wind, but did not see God. Then the earth shook, but God did not appear. Then came fire, but still no sign of God. a great silence fell over everything and Elijah heard and stepped out of the cave. The voice came again: "Why are you here?" Elijah rehearsed again his alibi. The response came: "Retrace your steps."

God is calling this congregation to return to the mountain; to grasp once again a vision for this church. God is calling us to share our love and passion for this church: the significant moments with one another, the special celebrations, the joy of being together. God is calling us to listen carefully to one another: to hear the stories of hope and love and desire. God is calling us to uncover the faithful path into the future; to name the possibilities God is holding out to us.

You are not alone in this challenge. As I was preparing I picked up online the story of Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis. This is a congregation that grew its ministry and program in the "good old days" and found itself in decline as generations and neighborhood changed. A pastor who had served the congregation in earlier days returned. He had been reflecting and studying and thinking and came to a realization. His discovery was that programs of service to the changed neighborhood diminished the people they served. They made their clients feel incapable. That pastor made a radical proposal to the congregation. Let's get to know them as neighbors. Let's give up the food pantry, the tutoring program, the Bible School. Let's send out a "roving reporter" to learn about the real interest, hopes and concerns of our neighbors. Let's discover the community assets that are right here.

The result was slow. It did bring people together - putting neighbors in touch with each other around common interests. They put their church

building to use in a different way: housing some small businesses for nominal rent; offering space for start-up enterprises, offering space for reading groups, art classes, programs of interest to the local community. The backyard gardeners became acquainted and now there is a very local farmers' market there.

That church is now a bustling place. All because they decided to treat their neighbors as friends. Jesus named his followers as friends as he bade them goodbye. Today Jesus is calling us to discover what we are called to be and do as we live into the future God holds for us.

Alleluia, Amen!