

There is a Moment

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Luke 9:51-62

July 1, 2007 - Susan Flanders

This morning's readings present us with an excruciating bind - perhaps one we've all faced - I know I have. You're going along with your life, and things are pretty comfortable, but then a new and compelling possibility opens up - one you may be very much drawn to embrace, or one you may actually fear - but in either case, to follow will mean leaving old patterns behind, perhaps upsetting people, and it will mean moving into new territory, doing things differently and facing unforeseen challenges. You must make a choice, and you often don't have a lot of time, sometimes only a moment. Ultimately, how you deal with this bind may be nothing short of a turning point in faith, a bind in which you might say you were confronted by God.

This is how I understand what's up in the readings we've heard just now. Elisha is suddenly, harshly confronted when Elijah, the great prophet, tosses his mantle - a hairy cloak, made of animal skin - over Elisha as a sign that he is called to succeed him. What a dramatic, symbolic act to convey this unexpected call! Elisha wants to delay, but Elijah urges the importance of leaving his people right away and following.

In the Gospel, Jesus is calling various folk to follow him, and now it involves the dangerous trip to Jerusalem. There is invitation, but there is cost. Not only might the following prove dangerous, but it will mean turning one's back on the past, on cultural expectations involving burial customs, on popular opinion. It's a bind.

A young woman of my acquaintance a long time ago faced such a bind. Raised very conventionally, she grew up knowing she was expected to do the right thing - finish college, marry an appropriate husband (meaning a good provider) and be a stay-at-home mom for well-behaved children. But, when she was only 19, love - deep, intense, young and romantic love - beckoned her otherwise. A few days after she'd been accepted for a junior year in Paris program, the phone rang. From a continent away, her beloved of two years asked her to marry him. She was thrilled - and devastated. What would her parents say? What about college? How would she ever explain this to the dean she'd finally convinced to let her go to Paris?

Like the people in the Bible stories, she asked for time before accepting. Couldn't they wait for at least one more year so as not to upset these other people, these plans? But, well, no, if they waited, he would be overseas, most likely in Southeast Asia by the time she got back from Paris. She loved the man

and wanted a life with him – she realized that she had to decide and had only a couple of days to do so. For her, this was not a religious dilemma in any overt way, it was more a decision about following one’s heart, one’s true sense of where one’s own life was leading – facing the consequences of disappointing others and of possibly making a mistake. After two days, she accepted the proposal, engaging herself to an unknown future, but one that was authentically and irrevocably hers – a turning point that would shape her life forever.

For many, such experiences do have a more clear connection with faith. Certainly many who went south in the 60’s to work in the civil rights movement felt that their faith called them to that effort – to go, to risk, to leave comfort and sometimes upset, angry parents behind. One of my colleagues who did this reported that it took years for him to heal the rift with his father that his following of a call to work for racial justice had caused. After 9/11, and again Katrina, how very many people essentially dropped what they were doing to go to those desperate places, New York and New Orleans, to help. The imperative to love our neighbors in concrete ways can be like this – beckoning us beyond our own safety and comfort, forcing us to choose sometimes between promises we’ve made to beloved people and following a call to help someone else – a friend, maybe even a stranger or a group of strangers, a neighbor who needs our care. These, to me, are examples of what it can mean and cost to follow Jesus.

Of all the examples and stories I know that illustrate a call to follow and the decisions we must make in such times, I am most taken with one from Frederick Buechner’s autobiography, *The Sacred Journey*. Buechner is probably the preacher, novelist and theologian who has most influenced my own development as a Christian, going back now some 30 years. I am always moved by this story, and maybe I have told it to you before.

One evening, Buechner, then a young high school teacher in his 20’s, was about to have dinner with his mother in her lovely New York City apartment. The table was set, the candles lit – they had not had time together in quite awhile and had both been looking forward to it. The phone rang. It was a friend and fellow teacher – weeping, sobbing into the phone. Horrified, Buechner learned of the terrible accident on the West Coast in which his friend’s parents and pregnant sister had been terribly injured and might not survive. The friend was waiting at the airport – then Idlewild – for a plane to go to them and asked if Buechner could come and be with him until the plane left. At one level, Buechner knew he should go, had to go – that human compassion demanded he go. But – he hesitated. He did so out of fear. He was afraid of the raw pain of the thing, the tears, his own helplessness to really comfort. He said he would come, but that he needed to do some things first – could the friend call him back in ten minutes? Back at the table, as his mother criticized the friend for asking

such a thing and spoiling their evening, Buechner saw himself and was appalled – appalled that he had actually shared some of those thoughts, appalled at his own selfishness. He resolved to go immediately, as soon as his friend called back. But when his friend did call, he said he really didn't need him to come; he was holding together, not to bother. And so Buechner did not go – he had missed the moment, chosen not to follow his friend's broken voice calling for help in favor of the haven of his mother's dinner table. For him, it was a moment of dreadful conviction and a turning point. It was the shattering recognition that his friend's call to him was for his own sake as well as the friend's, and he had denied it. He realized, and I quote "To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake, - even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death – that little by little we start to come alive. For Buechner, this was the beginning of a long, long journey of realizing that the only true life, the only true peace,, is never in retreat but only in engaging fully in the life of the world.

There are times like this in all our lives – when we are called to respond – to opportunity, to love, to terrifying need or grief – called away from safety and convention and what we're good at to what we can barely fathom. I believe these are God experiences – times when the power of love and life bids us into an unknown tomorrow, and we must choose – not even really knowing if it is God who calls. We do choose, and our choices show us our true selves – the goodness in us, the weakness and fear and frailty in us. We might think of such times as times when Jesus calls us to follow, and, by God's grace, we might find it in ourselves to do so, but the choice is always ours. Amen.