

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday June 27, 2010

Proper 8C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the name of our one living God who always calls us forward into new life: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's sometimes challenging to take the various readings the lectionary gives us to hear and think about and to see what common ideas or questions or challenges they help us see. Sometimes it is frustrating but far more often it is rewarding.

In our first reading from the second Book of Kings, we see a baton pass – a change in leadership as well as a change in God's way of dealing with the Israel. Two people walked into the desert together – the first is Elijah, a great prophet who was victorious over the prophets of Baal and slaughtered thousands of them. That was well known. Less well known was that after that incident he seemed to lose his identity and his appetite to be a prophet. He withdrew into the wilderness to lie down and die but was told to await for God in a cave atop Mt. Horeb. The second is Elisha, the young man God asked Elijah to anoint. Elisha is more a servant to Elijah than a student. He follows Elijah the victor over Baal. I wonder if he knows of Elijah the doubt-filled broken man on Mt. Horeb.

The story keeps us in suspense. Elisha is eager to follow but three times Elijah tells him to go back. When Elijah asks what Elisha would like before God takes him away, Elisha asks to receive a double portion of his spirit – that is, to be treated as an eldest son, as his successor. Elijah gives a non-committal answer. Maybe he doesn't have enough confidence in Elisha or maybe he wisely knows that what Elisha asks for is not his to give. We really don't know the result until young Elisha rolls the cloak Elijah left behind and strikes the waters of the River Jordan with it – and they part.

The story should have our heads ringing with memories of Moses and the Red Sea!

That's intentional. That's how the Bible is written and that is how it should be read. We search our memories and our histories when we face new problems in order to see how God works with us in order to find new answers.

I think there are two ideas that come out of the Elijah and Elisha stories that apply to our lives. The first is that God is still with us and concerned about bringing into being what God wants for God's people and Creation. God responded to oppression and injustice when he heard the Israelites cries in Egypt and enabled Moses to lead his people from the oppression and injustice of Pharaoh. Now the greed and intoxication with power of Pharaoh has entered the Kings of Israel. God again enables Elisha to cross the Jordan and deliver God's people from injustice.

I think the lesson here is that God isn't a puppeteer; God doesn't pull all the strings as Creator. Yet God isn't "Out There" somewhere – detached and indifferent. Like Jefferson's "Clockmaker". God cares about what goes on – about justice and compassion. Elijah worked hard to discern God's will and lived into it. Elisha is just starting the process but is empowered because of his willingness.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus also discerns the Father's will. Luke tells us that after some time ministering to his own people in Galilee, Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem. Unlike Elijah who carried God's judgment and punishment, Jesus has a different way of dealing with the world. When the Samaritans rejected him because he was a Jew, I had to wonder what was Jesus doing in Samaria in the first place? Jews and Samaritans detested one another. Jews would walk a couple of days' journey around Samaria just to avoid defiling themselves by being there. Yet Jesus went there to reach out even to those his people deemed to be heretics and impure. His disciples ask him if he wants to call down destruction on them as Elijah did to the Samaritans long ago. Unlike Elijah, Jesus rebukes them for even thinking about such a thing!

Jesus then talks about the call of discipleship – the single mindedness it requires not to be

distracted from the call. The examples given would seem to be extreme – asking to bury one’s father is a reasonable request and Jesus’ response would shock his listeners. I don’t know about you, but it shocks me. I think it was intended to shock, to cause them to ask questions. It is hyperbole – exaggerated speech. The next example sheds more light on it. Any farmer knows what happens when you are plowing and don’t look straight ahead as you go. For me it would be like driving in reverse down Front Street without a rearview mirror.

So what about us? Are we seeking to discern God’s will and respond? Or are we being distracted in our lives and in our culture and church by other priorities, other interests? In our world today there are no end of distractions. You used to have to go out to find them now they are in our home via the media – and you can even carry them around with you via cell phones, i-phones. They even make them for our kids – Gameboys, etc.

Are we distracted by the past – always looking back rather than ahead? There are a lot of people out there who want to return the world, at least “their world,” to the Good Old Days- you know the days when things were “the way God intended them to be.” That is very un-Biblical. The kingdom is always coming and not here yet, let alone was here before and has to be recaptured.

In plowing a field, one has to follow the past by watching the previous row plowed, yet one has to do this while looking ahead to see what obstacles or changes in terrain would require a change in direction. Jesus is telling us that to bring about the Kingdom of God, one must look ahead. However, that is not to say that the past does not guide us until we perceive a need to change direction. A lot of people resist this either by looking only backwards or totally disregarding the past for what is popular at the moment.

Here in Hawaii and in this parish we have a rich culture and history. We should build upon it – but we must do so while looking ahead to see how we must alter our path in order to bring in the biggest harvest. There is a lot of tension in that and there will be missteps but we can change and still retain our identity and our history.

Amen.