

Stepping into the unknown

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33

Eric Marinus Nelson □ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC □ 10 August 2008

□.□.□.

When you're trying to make a tough decision, when you're seeking guidance, what do you do? You can seek others' opinions, you can do research, you can lift it up in prayer, but often there comes a point where you have to gather all that up—ambiguous as it is—and step into the unknown. We've all done it, I'd wager. Maybe frequently, maybe not. Maybe recently, maybe years ago. So while I'll use a personal experience as the springboard for these comments this morning, I do it in confidence that somehow this relates to your life as well.

Backing up once more to bring the visitors up to speed, the occasion for this sermon is that in a couple of months, I'll be concluding my ministry here after 16-plus years. I'm not leaving to go to another church. I'm not leaving because I've fallen out of love with this place or these people. And though I have for the most part been able to hold my own emotions at arm's length, it will be very hard to say goodbye when October rolls around. This is the finest church community I know, and especially if you're visiting, I encourage you to keep coming, to get to know these people and the ways in which this congregation makes room for others. This is a community of lively, smart, fun, and warm people, committed to working for a better world. They are inspired by the love of God made known in Christ, in other religious traditions, and in one another. (They also know how to put on a good spread of food.)

So where to start?

I thought of calling this sermon “And now for something completely different.” Something about the Monty Python echo of that seemed appropriate, not least of which because I'm headed to England, to enroll in the London International School of Performing Arts. (Performing arts? That's a long story, which I'll get to in a minute.) But that title wouldn't really speak to the sermonic elements that might mean something to you, too. So I'm calling it “Stepping into the unknown.”

Wonder of wonders, the suggested scripture readings for today happen to fit well.

Recall Elijah's experience, and Peter's. We may not be prophets (and feel that ours is no great matter), but surely we've all had the experience of trying to discern the urgings of the universe from different events in our lives. Elijah goes up the mountain seeking guidance from God. Does God speak through grand things like earthquake, wind, and fire? Sometimes perhaps, but not in this story. And then there's Peter, who does what is by all measures a foolish thing, stepping out of the security of his boat to walk on the water. The remarkable thing in the story is not that he gets wet, but that for a time he actually succeeds in doing what seemed impossible, loony, and ridiculous. It's his own doubt that sinks him. Maybe there's something here about making your decision and not turning back.

Twice this year I've had very intense experiences of conflict when trying to make a decision. One was relatively minor, though it seemed big at the time. It had to do with whether to take part in an extended retreat at the spiritual community in Taizé, France, a trip that was sponsored by the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ. The details aren't important now, but as the time for committing to that trip approached, more and more things came up that made it harder and

harder to go, easier to stay. Call them my little earthquake, wind, and fire. Let's just say the timing of the trip could have been better. I was corresponding with a minister friend at the time, and one of her remarks gave me pause, right as I was about to cancel my reservation. "It must really be important for you to go," she wrote. "Otherwise, why would all these forces be conspiring to keep you from doing it?"

Now, I recognize that that could be the voice of rationalization speaking. But in this case it gave me a moment of calm to reconsider, spurred me to step back and consider one more time. I did go, and on the retreat I recognized a spiritual truth about myself that I hadn't seen so clearly before, and that is how hard it is for me to trust in life-changing situations that I can't manage. I'm pretty good at trusting in the abilities of other people. But when it comes to stepping out of the boat and trusting more mysterious powers that may be moving in my life, that's a different matter.

I have recognized for a while that I might be approaching a pivot point in my life, a time that might involve a change in career. I'm not going to go into this in full right now—it could take a while, and I'm not sure this is the right forum—but you can know that I've been having conversations about this pretty extensively in private over the past several months. As quixotic as my decision to go to school in London might seem, this is not a rash move.

It's also the case that as a man in my early 50s, if I'm going to make a change, I don't want to wait too much longer. I still want to have time to move into what lies ahead for me, and ageism is alive and all too well, as many of you can attest. It gets harder to make a fresh start as you move into your mid-50s and beyond, harder to convince people to give you a chance.

Whether that would be a factor or not, there's also an internalized ageism, an inner working to which T.S. Eliot gave voice in one of his poems—a debilitating caution begotten by years that can dim our vision and insinuate its way into us in such a way that we close ourselves off to possibilities that are still open to us. It is a man of middle age who speaks in Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

We're no strangers to fear, and it is increasingly the gruel we are fed in this day and age (and often, *as* we age). But if I were to sum up the gospel in one phrase, it's this: Be not afraid. It is Peter's fear that sinks him, just as it was his fear that led him to deny the one who had given him new life. Today's story is not the only time Peter leaves his boat. I can think of at least two others. In one, he leaps into the water when he sees Christ on the seashore cooking breakfast on an Easter morning. And Peter's whole story began years before when he left his boat behind to go with this charismatic figure who came walking along the strand and said to him, "Follow me."

Don't get me wrong. I've had no such revelation. Jesus didn't tell me to leave the safety of my current circumstances and join him in London. (That would truly be worthy of a skewering skit by Monty Python!) Such a glib claim would belittle the story from the gospels, and it would also make light of the very real struggles that many of us have in making our choice when there are conflicting forces urging us in different directions. It's not always clear whether God is speaking in earthquake or wind or fire or simple sheer silence. It's not always clear whether God is speaking at all. Sometimes, if I may confide in you, I think our denomination has gotten a bit glib in its slogan, "God is still speaking." Sometimes I want to shout back, "Maybe so, but not to *me!*" (Then again, I do take some comfort in the thought that God has bigger fish to fry.)

There came a time a month or so ago when deadlines for a decision about going to London were upon me. If I were to give my 90-days notice here, I had to do so by July 20. That also corresponded with the date by which I had to let the school know whether I'd be coming. And every day for about two weeks when I looked at the paper or listened to the radio, the news was all about how the economy was in shambles. Banks were under threat of failing. The housing market is in the toilet (not that we've ever considered selling right now). Fuel prices were going up. Heating costs might double this winter. And Robin and I had to wonder if this was a good time for me to leave my job. Little things came up, too. The dishwasher broke down, a pesky reminder of the things that Robin will have to deal with on her own when I'm in a far country. The list went on. Was it prudence arguing against making this change, or was this an instance of angry forces trying to hold me back from something that was really important for me to do?

Sometimes you simply have to decide which voices to listen to.

You hear the gale blowing. Is God in the wind? The earthquake shakes your world. Is God in the earthquake? Fire consumes your forward movement. Is God in the fire? Or is this the eternal Footman holding your coat and snickering?

If you noticed, the story of Elijah on the mountain came to a turning point with the sound of sheer silence. But the silence didn't answer Elijah's question. What it did was prompt him to ask his question again. He could have been persuaded by the obvious and clamoring sounds that nearly overwhelmed him. But the silence intervened. And Elijah covered his face, left his cave, and asked his question again.

Why am I going? I've explained this in different ways, but let me put it this way today.

I feel the need to expand my current patterns of understanding things, and that may entail breaking out of some of them. That's not to say that I think the understandings formed by my faith have become invalid, more that I think I may have become too used to them. There's a danger in becoming too cozy with your approach to things that are ultimately Other and mysterious. I don't want to become that cozy. And it is my hope that immersing myself in such a different environment—one that uses such a physical and imagistic discipline as this school in London does—will force me into a fresh and creative frame of mind, body, and spirit that I might enter a new age of personal discovery. This is, I believe, a form of spiritual search.

Thomas Prattki, the founder of Lispa (the school I'll be throwing my life into for now) describes it in this way. He speaks in terms of artists and the performing arts, but don't let that block you:

The vision to be an artist reflects the desire to feel the movement of life around and within us. This is why we place the dynamics of life at the very center of our interest—in order to gain a deeper understanding of the world we live in. We hope to foster in our students those qualities which they will need most in order to find their place as artists in the performing world: a never-ending curiosity in life as it is; a strong vision of life as it could be; and a fully alive body through which to express creative vision.

I could leave it there, but there's one more important point to make. And that has to do with the question, Where does this lead? Allow me an answer by way of an image.

We've all seen finished paintings, but few of us get to see all the steps the painter goes through to get there. I saw a fascinating exhibit in the National Portrait Gallery in London. One room is dedicated to the process by which a portrait is painted. On one wall hangs a finished portrait, next to which are maybe 40 small photos of the work in progress, accompanied by some excerpts from the painter's journal. At one point, at what turns out to be about halfway through the development of the painting, the portrait looks like it could be finished. The artist remarks that he was tempted to stop there, but he knew things weren't quite ready and there was more to emerge. So the next snapshot shows that he has put a black wash over the whole canvas, darkening the image, intentionally obscuring it. And then as you look at the following images, you see the portrait develop in a subtle but appreciably richer way, the hues and shadowing more complex.

I don't want to prejudge where this is taking me. In a sense, I'm entering that darkened phase. To seize upon an image of the end too quickly might keep me from allowing richer hues and shadows to emerge. It's too early for me to know exactly what this portrait is going to look like.

Or you might say I'm entering the silence that's described in the Elijah story. I will ask my questions again and again while I am at Lispa. And it is my fervent prayer not just that God will be speaking, but that I'll be able to discern the wisdom in what I hear. Regardless, I do trust in the goodness of God—for me and for you—as we move into these next stages of our lives.