

“STILL SMALL VOICES”
1 Kings 19:1-13; Galatians 3:23-29
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By the time I was a senior in college, I was pretty sure that my next step career-wise would be a Ph.D. in American Studies. I loved academics. I loved 17th century American religious history. Go figure. So no one was more surprised than I when in the dining hall one evening, as people were musing on their post-graduation plans, I offered “I’ve been thinking of going to divinity school.” Well, in fact I had never thought about going to divinity school. I didn’t know where the words came from. But once said, the words took on a life of their own. I broached the subject with my parents. They were less than thrilled. “What a waste of an education,” commented my father (who devoutly wanted me to be a lawyer). I went then to my boyfriend, son of a Methodist minister. “The day you enter seminary is the day I leave,” was his encouraging feedback. Finally, I went to my church mentor, the Episcopal priest who had been my best friend since 7th grade. “Lizzie,” he advised me urgently, “if there is anything, anything else you want to do, go and do that.” Clearly, those who knew me best thought I had a natural gift for ministry! I dropped the idea, took a left turn, and went off to New York to work for *American Heritage* magazine.

But the idea wouldn’t die. Having studied American Puritanism and the Puritan insistence on bold, life-changing conversion experiences, I made a bargain with God. “God, if you want me to be a minister, you will make something happen: an engraved invitation, heaven-sponsored skywriting, a burning bush, maybe just a small shrub.” Two years passed; two years, nothing happened. So I thought maybe God needed help. I kept setting up opportunities for God to communicate with me. This will move me. That will ignite my prayer life. More nothing. One day, the book editor at work gave me the manuscript of William Sloane Coffin’s new autobiography to see if the magazine might want to excerpt part of it. I went home that night and set up a really good opportunity for God. Bill Coffin had been a friend and mentor when I was at Yale. “God, if you want me to be a minister, I will find something in this book that will make up my mind.” I read all night, finishing at 5:00 a.m. It was a good book. It had not stirred my vocation. I was devastated. I really believed this was going to be THE test, and I had failed. Or God had failed me. I lay down in the bed in that place between wakefulness and sleep, and as my mind drifted freeform, out of the silence came a thought. “Liz, you have wanted a sign so that you would have no responsibility for choosing this path. You have to make the decision.” I got up, took a shower, ate breakfast, went to my office, and quit my job. Two months later, I began divinity school and never looked back.

Was it God? Or was it just me finally waking to my own privilege/responsibility of choosing? I don’t know. I only know that into the silence an hour before dawn, that time when darkness and

discouragement are least easily dispelled, a still small voice gave me the courage to change my life.

My friend Sarah is a corporate executive and a recovering alcoholic. Over five years ago now, after an evening entertaining clients in Boston, she woke up on the floor of her hotel room not knowing how she got there, not remembering much of the night past. Not her first alcoholic black out. She ordered room service coffee and a bowl of oatmeal. One of her drinking friends had assured her that oatmeal was the best cure for a hangover. It wasn't. All morning, she told me, it roiled like battery acid in her stomach. In the midst of the client's presentation, she felt the person next to her press a note into her hand. She put it in her pocket. Later, at the break, she pulled it out and read: "One day at a time," followed by a phone number. She quickly stuffed the note back in her pocket where it remained for two days. On the third, she called the number, and an hour later, a then stranger came and picked her up and took her to her first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. "I had always made the excuse," she told me years later, "that some great event would make me quit drinking. But then I had my first and second and third black outs and I kept drinking. My partner left me. She even took the cat with her because she said I was not responsible enough even to take care of a cat. None of that got me to stop. It was a quickly penciled note, torn from the corner of a client's yellow pad." One day at a time. To this day, the note is taped to her bathroom mirror, and earlier this year, she celebrated her fifth birthday anniversary of her sobriety.

Michael is a friend of my daughter Sarah. He works for the Sun program in Portland, running an after school program for 4th through 6th graders in Northeast Portland, trying to keep them out of gangs. Yeah, 4th-6th graders. As you might imagine, it's hard work with at least as many failures as successes. Just after his 29th birthday, three years into the job, Michael felt burnt out, ready to quit. On a Saturday bike ride, he was cataloguing his discouragement to a fellow rider—difficult kids, difficult parents, declining funding, staff turn over. Maybe he should get a "real" job. The rider beside him, someone who worked in computers, a person Michael had never met before, turned and looked at him. "If it weren't for a program like yours, I would have turned out to be a punk and a druggie. I hope you don't quit." Two sentences. That's all. And Michael is still working at the program and has started his master's in Social Work.

When Elijah the prophet came to Mount Horeb, the resting place at the end of his prophetic flight, he was confused and uncertain about his vocation and God's support of that vocation. He was at a crossroads; the place where choices had to be made. And he was exhausted, overwhelmed, tired of working too hard for too little. He found his way to a cave, and within its womblike shelter, he whined out his complaint to God: "I've done everything right and still your people have abandoned your ways. They killed the other prophets and now they are after me." Not once but twice he repeated his lament. And Elijah went out to the mouth of the cave to wait for God. A great wind came up; then an earthquake; then a fire: the kind of display of divine pyrotechnics all of us wish for when we seek God's guidance, but very few get. God, we are

told, was not in those vast brilliant displays. The ruckus died down, and all that remained was the sound of sheer silence. The sound of sheer silence. It was there, in silence, as night shaded to morning, that Elijah heard the voice of God. And that quiet voice directed him away from the cave, away from the safety of God's mountain, and back into the work Elijah was called to do. Elijah went.

There are so many times for all of us when our lives are at a crossroads, or in a crisis, or that we are simply tired and discouraged with our lives. The work that is before us seems endless and unrewarding. And we who are of a churchly bent, we often seek God's counsel at such times. In my life, I have known a few—a very few—people who readily and easily seek and find God's word to them. And I envy them their clarity. But for the rest of us I think, the practice of God's presence is more mysterious, more second-hand. We hear the still small voice of the divine not spoken through a megaphone or surrounded with neon lights. It comes as a wayward thought, as the kindness of a stranger, or a chance comment by a friend. Some small moment. And our minds clear, and our hearts lift, and we are ready to re-engage in the business of our lives with new resolve or purpose or strength. We move forward, and only later do we think to ask ourselves, "Was this God?" Is this how the divine presence moves over the face of the earth—not in earthquake, fire, and neon, but in small voices that come as us unannounced and unexpected?

Other than the story of Elijah, I can't say beyond a doubt that any of the above stories involve an encounter with God. But I can say that neither Michael, nor Sarah, nor I will ever forget those particular moments, those turning points, when God was sought and something was found, something powerful enough to change the direction of a life, to help an addict find her sobriety, to give one of the good guys the strength to enter back into the struggle for the lives and futures of our most at-risk children. So when you look for God, my counsel for you is: don't wait upon a flaming shrub in the front garden, or an engraved invitation. Don't ask for certainty, God's signature on the bottom line. Just listen for the small voices all around you, and when you hear the one that urges you forward, the one that offers strength and hope and healing, pay attention. Perhaps, maybe shading to probably, God has come and touched your life and brought you one step farther on your journey. Thanks be to God. Amen.