

**This Ministry**

February 11, 2018

New Song Episcopal Church

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(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

The two verses that precede today's reading in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians helped me put all of today's readings into a context I could better understand. They say:

*“Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.”*

The passage then continues with:

*“Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”*

All of today's readings seem to be centered on one idea: ministry. What is ministry? Who is the Apostle Paul writing to when he says, “...since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry...”?

The short definition of ministry could be “the Lord’s work,” but again, what is that? What does that mean?

I personally think ministry is something that happens, not a vocation that we can randomly take up or choose to do. In my mind, ministry is the end result of a changed

life. Ministry begins when people encounter God, much like Elisha did in today's Hebrew scripture reading, and Paul did in the book of Acts, and Peter and James and John did on the mountain in today's Gospel.

In each case, the people involved walked away from their experience changed. They saw something, they heard something, they each came to a realization of something greater than themselves that was worth living for. In each case, it so changed their perspectives that the remainder of their lives was spent working on behalf of others.

This to me is ministry. It isn't just education and study, although those are valuable. It is an encounter that changes you to the point where you can't help but want to serve in some way. Today, these encounters with God most frequently happen through an interaction with one of God's followers, as a result of love demonstrated and felt.

Sometimes the encounter is subtle and both the encounter and change happen over time; years, even decades. An example of this is Elisha, who made a choice to serve Elijah and learn from him for several years (most scholars say 7-8). Elisha was a protégé, a learner, a servant until the day he refused to leave his master alone and saw him taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Only then did he literally take up Elijah's mantle (an article of clothing) as well as his vocation.

Other times the change feels nearly spontaneous like with Paul or the apostles at the transfiguration in today's Gospel. All these saw, heard, and experienced something that caused them to walk away changed. Awakened.

But, what causes such a change? Such an awakening?

I think the big factors are these: choosing to be open, choosing to pay attention, and choosing to do what you believe is right. We might add realizing that change is

rarely instant, but usually happens over time, perhaps sparked by one brief incident.

After his encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul spent at least a year in Antioch choosing to forsake his leadership role as one of the powerful Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. He instead sat at the feet of the leaders of this new group called The Way, the Christ-followers, the ones who were eventually called “Christians” (which happened for the first time at Antioch, for the trivia buffs).

Paul did not presume to demand a leadership role, he instead sat and listened, proving himself until such a time as during a prayer meeting the Holy Spirit said, “Separate me Saul” in Acts 13. The believers there laid hands on him and confirmed the anointing they already saw on him from God. It was only after this point that Saul changed his name to Paul.

I don’t think that it is preaching that is the focus of “this ministry” Paul refers to. I think it is a concept I think I have referred to almost every time I have preached here at New Song. Light shining out of darkness. As Paul said:

*For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

What is this light? It is the result of that awakening experience, the realization of the greatness of one more powerful than you, of your worth to God, and subsequently of the worth of every person in God’s creation. Once you experience this light, you can’t hate your neighbor, you can’t mistreat the foreigner, you can’t help but want to be kind, to share the love that has so deeply transformed your heart.

We all have different gifts, varied talents and abilities. How this light shining out of you will manifest as ministry will not be the same as how it shines out of someone else. There will be striking parallels, though. People you encounter will feel valued and

loved. You will find yourself wanting to do things you once thought beneath you or not worth your time. Predicting exactly what those things are is a fool's game; God often uses us in ways that confound both ourselves and those around us. It is not up to anyone else to say how you are to minister, or where, or in what role or capacity. It is up to YOU to be open, to listen, and then to act accordingly.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19, God spoke to Elijah. First there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then came a fire, but God was not in the fire. Finally, there came a still, small voice. This was God, and when Elijah listened to what that voice said, he did great things.

By the way, God's definition of "great things" and ours do not always agree.

Does the voice use words? Maybe. Often we just have a feeling, something that makes a certain act feel infinitely more important than others. If the motive is love, it is very likely pure and worth acting on.

Often we are asked by that still, small voice inside to do things that we think we can't do. Other times, we have limitations that others do not see and, therefore, find ourselves unable to fulfill their expectations and hopes for us, but we are *always* able to do what the still, small voice leads us to do.

I wish one more verse of Paul's text would have been included in today's reading. I'm going to quote it here to emphasize my last point.

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*

Clay jars are fragile. They may be beautiful or plain, depending on how they were made by the potter...but that isn't up to the jar. The purpose of the jar is to hold what it is given and transfer it back out at the proper moment. The ornamentation of the jar has no bearing on how well or how poorly it fulfills this purpose.

It is never about us, our abilities, our gifts, our skills, our looks, our finances, etc. Ministry is all about choosing to listen for and to that still, small, love-infused voice that enables us and guides us to go out into the world to love and serve our neighbor.

Amen.

### **Old Testament: 2 Kings 2:1-12**

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

### **The Psalm: 50:1-6**

#### ***Deus deorum***

1 The LORD, the God of gods, has spoken; \*  
he has called the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.

2 Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty, \*  
God reveals himself in glory.

3 Our God will come and will not keep silence; \*  
before him there is a consuming flame,  
and round about him a raging storm.

4 He calls the heavens and the earth from above \*  
to witness the judgment of his people.

5 "Gather before me my loyal followers, \*  
those who have made a covenant with me  
and sealed it with sacrifice."

6 Let the heavens declare the rightness of his cause; \*  
for God himself is judge.

### **The Epistle: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

### **The Gospel: Mark 9:2-9**

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.