

A pilgrim's parable

Psalm 39:1-10, 12-13, 1 Kings 19:3-9, 1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 6:51,54-58 Rev Jean Shannon

To the Hindus, three is the perfect number, it is in harmony with life. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. So does a calling. I have come to the end of this particular ministry for this particular congregation but before I move back towards our psalm, I'd like to revisit my beginning.

On retreat, we were asked to pick a bible passage and write a parable that reflected our life. There's were a dozen passages to choose but it was a no brainer for me. Here is what I wrote – see if you can pick the passage.

Once upon a time there was a girl born far, far away. Her's was a diverse family and not particularly religious. They upheld the High Holy Days but left it up to her to explore spiritual possibilities.

The world was in a terrible state...

And she swore she would do something to help make it a better place.

She joined the anti-war movement.

She thought of going into social work or counselling.

She became a teacher.

She worked hard in aid and development for the 3rd world countries and first world understanding...

And for peace in the Middle East.

At last, she thought, it is structural reform we need to bring about social change so she worked harder and harder identifying systemic errors and moral hazards. She worked diligently writing and amending legislation and teaching principled negotiation (where no-one loses). She taught so that law could be a force for good.

She heard the voice of God...

But confused it for performance appraisal.

She heard the voice of God...

But thought it was for someone else

She heard the voice of God,

But believed her birth and upbringing made her unsuitable.

And finally, a wise old man told her to stop, stop thinking and listen.

And at that point, everything changed.

You see Sam was an unlikely candidate, faithful in his service but not religious. He was sold¹ into the temple as a servant. He was good at his job and understood it. But God called. Who? He mistook it to relate to his duties so he obeyed in the way he thought he was called. God called again, and again and Sam took it to relate to

¹ Or traded, depending on your point of view. He was the payment for a bargain.

his responsibilities. It took a wise old, **blind** man to see what was happening. He told Sam “go, listen”... and he told him how to respond.

I am an unlikely minister. I do not come from a long line of faith leaders. We have no priests, rabbis or bishops in our family tree. If I stretch back to a great, great, perhaps even greater grandfather then we *may* find a religious teacher.

Who understands God’s call? If you look closely at most of the disciples and many of the converts in the Gospel – they are equally unsuitable.

I spent a lot of time explaining to the sapphire Coast joint nominating committee why I was probably the wrong person for this placement. I am a deacon. I am a chaplain. I am used to translating the gospel into secular language for non-church-going people. The committee seemed not convinced – and called me anyway. They set to work creating a beautiful home and a magnificent welcoming. We were embraced and felt loved. And so we are here.

Lesson one – we don’t get to choose who God calls. Tarts and tax collectors, unreligious servants, foreigners and women and a whole lot more.

What am I doing here? When you are in the middle...

Elijah tried his best but in the end he went from Beer-sheba into the desert to die. He crawled under a bush and said, I am a failure – take me Lord. I know that feeling. When you preach the Gospel and see it has had no effect. You preach with all your heart and all your soul and all the understanding that you can bring and the people don’t hear the message. Nothing changes. But the angel says, eat and drink – you will need strength for the journey. So you eat a little, study a little more and go back to sleep. But the Angel says eat and drink – you will need it for the journey.

Elijah goes out and he travels and travels – for 40 days through the desert and across the land to the Holy Mountain. And when he finally makes it, he crawls into a cave – the holy equivalent of pulling the doona over your head and giving up aspirations. But the angel says get up, go outside because God will soon pass by. What? Like a giant stalking the earth?

He goes out ...and there is wind – but God is not in the wind. And there is an earthquake but God is not in the quaking ...
And there is silence – and God is in the silence.

Let's pause for a moment to feel the significance and intimacy that silence brings.
(pause)

God breaks the silence... almost with a drop of irony, God says, "What are you doing here?"

There are so many ways to interpret that. So many voices and inflections that completely change both the question and the answer.

Could it be a sign of puzzlement? What the heck are you doing *here*? Shouldn't you be somewhere else?

Or perhaps, what are you *doing* in that cave?

Feeling sorry for yourself – are we?

Why aren't you somewhere you are supposed to be doing what you're supposed to be doing?

Or perhaps it is a pastoral question that could be reframed in counselling language. "What is happening inside you?" "What brought you here?" or or even, "What is your plan?" "What are you *doing*?"

Each word could have a different inflection or emphasis which entirely changes the meaning. An actor could make much of this².

I have always taken it to mean your work is not over. Dust yourself off and get on with it. **And** don't forget to listen.

That to me, is the middle of mission. Taking the bumps and bruises. Perhaps hiding in a cave for a little while but then getting back out there where there is need. Lesson 2 – we don't always understand the question – so we really, *really*, have to learn to listen – again.

And so, I come to the end of this placement and the end of this kind of ministry. I have every confidence that this congregation is energised to pastor to each other until another leader is found. The liturgy team is already in action and no doubt you have enjoyed the variety of leaders and speakers. Ailsa should be particularly encouraged in her studies. There are a lot of behind-the-scene roles that I have come to really appreciate: a special thanks to Rosemary and Pauline for their devotion to Imlay and to all our op shop managers, volunteers and providers.

Most of all, remember, you are the body of Christ. You must feed and be fed to thrive.

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

² WHAT are you doing here? What ARE you doing here? What are YOU doing here? What are you DOING here? What are you doing HERE?

⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.³

I'd like to end with a couple of refrains from our psalm today as I look for wisdom and grace for whatever the future brings. Listen carefully – as I have learned to do...

⁴'Lord, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.

⁵You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. *Selah*

¹²'Hear my prayer, O Lord,
and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears.
For I am your passing guest,
an alien, like all my forebears⁴.

Lesson 3 – in the end, we are all aliens, guests at HIS great table. How amazing and fortunate that is.

I never imagined being here. So much is beyond our imaginations and plans. Still, I give thanks and know that we were blessed to be called to this place and to be with you as part of this community. Bless you and vitalise you for the new calling.

My prayer, though silent, goes something like this:

God, who brought me out of the desert – on this journey –
Guide me as I leave the trodden path. Bless me. Rest me, and open new doors to wisdom. Amen

³ John 6:

⁴ Psalm 39:1-10, 12-13