

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 13th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-
I Kings 19: 16, 19-21 Psalm 16 Galatians 5: 1, 13-18 Luke 9: 51-62
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Let's not skip too quickly over the first reading. Such a reading, about prophets and the succession of prophesy, holds great potential for a message about God's involvement and concern for us—especially when we are in crisis. Isn't that a word we would use to sum up these days, “crisis,”: for our world (with the June 30th. turnover of authority in Iraq looming over us); for our church (with the battering our leadership has taken and our people expressing feelings of being rudderless) and for many of our families as well?

First, we note the names of the two prophets in the I King's reading. Diane Bergant (PREACHING THE NEW LECTIONARY. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000) tells us that Elijah's name means, “my God [El] is the Lord [Jah]” and Elisha's means, “my God [Eli] saves [Sha].” So, Elijah's prophetic identity and the purpose of his mission were to call people to fidelity to one God, when they were tempted to take on a few extra gods from their pagan surroundings. Elisha's role, revealed by his name, was to invite people to trust God to save them. According to these two prophetic luminaries, there was one true God who could be counted on to deliver the people. Worship of other gods or earthly powers would only disappoint and leave the people floundering.

The Elijah-Elisha story is about prophetic successions. Elijah was the prophet whose return the Jewish people longed to see because it would herald the arrival of the messiah and a time of peace and freedom. When they celebrate the Seder, Jews end the meal by opening the front door of their home to welcome in the spirit of Elijah and they pray he comes with his gifts of justice and freedom for the world. While Israel had many false prophets during Elijah's time (9th century B.C.E.), he was regarded as authentic, one who spoke faithfully the message he heard from God. But he was about to take his leave, and they would miss this representative of God who was the sign that God had not forgotten the people in travail.

Choosing Elisha as a successor was Elijah's assurance, and God's, that the people would not be left bereft of God's daily concern and care. The symbolic act, that showed Elisha was to be Elijah's successor, was when the senior prophet put his cloak over his protege. This line of succession was not automatic; not something Elisha could claim on his own by birthright as, for example, when a successor inherits the throne from royal parents---whether the new ruler has gifts for leadership or not. Elisha has been hand-picked by Elijah and Elisha didn't accept

his responsibility because he saw personal gain in it. In fact, Elisha's first act, once he accepts Elijah's invitation, was to separate himself from his parents. He also sacrifices his twelve yoke of oxen (he must have been a person of means), gives them as food to his people and then he "left and followed Elijah as his attendant." Elisha's response to God's call requires sacrifice, but he willingly puts aside his life's projects for the uncertain, sacrificial and frequently painful vocation of a prophet.

"To follow" and "to serve" in biblical language mean something very specific. These terms infer personal allegiance. When we follow and serve someone, we enter into personal relationship. Note that Elisha says to Elijah, "I will follow you." In Luke, the potential follower says to Jesus, "I will be your follower." Personal allegiance is what we Christians are about. We don't follow a dogma or creed, but the person of Christ.

Note too, the call to Elisha comes in the midst of his daily life, a very typical place for a call in the Bible. Recall Peter washing his nets, Matthew in the toll booth, Moses tending sheep, etc. What we do every day can be where we hear the call to: simplify our lives, cut back on our hectic schedule for the sake of our family, get out of an abusive relationship, quit the gang of kids we hang around with, etc. We celebrate Independence Day next Sunday. It's a secular holiday but calls us to reflect on our own slavery and addictions that keep us from being free. Hear the call of independence to more sanity; less violence in our speech and actions; and the realization that "having it all," is having nothing at all.

From one generation to the next, God cares for the people by sending them inspired prophets who are willing and quick to put aside their own interests in order to serve God and God's people. We could use such generous, gifted and prophetic leadership today. But based on the I Kings reading, we might look again to see if we are not missing the obvious--- the God-sent prophets in our midst. I recently finished a Fall-Winter-Spring preaching cycle in parishes around the country. I lived a week at a time in these places and got to talk with lots of people. Besides meeting gifted ordained men and women members of religious orders, I have been deeply impressed by the number of dedicated lay professionals and volunteers in all kinds of ministries—they are prophets, messengers of God's vital desire to be in touch with us. They show us the way to right thinking about God and just behavior towards others. I meet countless parish spokespersons for peace and justice, the poor, neglected children, immigrants and the elderly. The prophet's cloak has been passed down from former generations to the present one.

What a change from my childhood when a parish staff consisted of priests, a secretary, cook and handyman. The lay staff I now meet and minister with work long hours and the ones who receive salaries certainly don't get enough for the all they do. The volunteers dedicate what

precious free time they have to all kinds of ministry within the parishes, but also in many forms of outreach, not only without pay, but too frequently without the full recognition they deserve. The preacher would do well today to raise the congregation's awareness of the presence of so many who respond in quite ordinary ways to Christ's initiation, "Follow me." They have heard the call, examined the implications it has in their particular lives and been willing to pay the price by saying "yes".

It's clear from today's gospel that Jesus expects a thoughtful response to his invitation, not just from a select few, but from all of us. While we celebrate the generosity of so many who minister in our church, nevertheless, the invitation is not limited to just the 10% of a parish who are numbered on the list of "church workers/volunteers." Rather, each Christian needs to be attentive to Jesus' invitation and ponder how to respond to it. Following Christ is not one thing among the many things we do each day. It should be at the core of our lives and the basis of the decisions we make. This gospel today is about a moment of decision, not just for those in the narrative, but for each of us. We are being invited to a new and more meaningful life, as well as one that requires personal sacrifice.

Almost all the ministry I do is from a church-based community; I am part of an institution. But Jesus' response to the first person who approaches him reminds me that Jesus was not primarily about institutions and fixed structures. At the heart of ministry for those who follow him, is a reminder that we must be flexible enough to respond to changes of locations and situations. Our service is first of all to Jesus, every other concern is secondary to living his life and doing his work. At our core, we are itinerants, "Foxes have dens....but the son of Man has nowhere to rest his head." He and we will go wherever there is the need to preach and witness to Christ—to the poor, sick and outsider; but also, to the comfortable, stubborn and indifferent. Today is a day of decision and flexibility, for once again Jesus is inviting us, "Follow me..."

Those invited to follow Jesus are not told where the journey will take them. At meetings I attend someone hands out an agenda, which makes me happy. I can see where we are, where we are going and what will help get us there. But Jesus wasn't giving out a game plan the day he said, "Follow me." Those who respond to him will have to put aside the need to know and control their lives. We have joined him on the road, and we will have to trust he knows where we are going and what will help get us there. After all, this Eucharist reminds us that Jesus hasn't packed up and shipped out on us. We call these Sundays, the Sundays after Pentecost. We are reminded we continually celebrate that Jesus has not left us orphans, but that we have his Spirit helping us respond to the One who speaks in the present tense to us today, "Follow me."

QUOTABLE

“God is love, the way an emerald is green.”
—Simone Weil

JUSTICE NOTES

National Election-Year Initiative

Challenges Candidates, Voters to Address Poverty

“What will you do to end poverty?” A new national alliance of community and faith-based groups wants an answer to that question from public officials, delegates to the Party Conventions and this year’s candidates for public office, especially the presidential candidates. The alliance, “LET JUSTICE ROLL: Faith and Community Voices Against Poverty” also will work to register, mobilize and protect voters, especially low-income voters, whose voices must be heard on policies that affect them.

"LET JUSTICE ROLL" takes its name from the Bible book of Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream ..." (Amos 5:24 NRSV).

"LET JUSTICE ROLL" events are being scheduled in cities across the United States, beginning with Seattle, Wash., June 25-26. This multi-city initiative will continue in Portland and Eugene, Ore.; Rochester, N.Y.; Minneapolis, Minn., and beyond and will include events in Boston, Mass., and New York City concurrent with the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. The Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., Senior Minister of The Riverside Church in New York City and featured during the 2003-4 season on PBS' "NOW with Bill Moyers, will be the featured speaker at at least seven events.

The National Council of Churches and the Center for Community Change are co-sponsoring these public events with national, state and local partner organizations to keep the issue of ending poverty front and center in this presidential election year. Participants will seek commitments from local, state and national public officials and delegates to the Republican and Democratic National Conventions that they will work to shape public policies to meet the needs of people living in poverty and, ultimately, to end poverty.

Local “LET JUSTICE ROLL” events will be one or two days in length and typically will include meetings of religious and community leaders with elected officials and Party Convention delegates; a news conference on local and national issues; voter education, registration, mobilization and protection, and a worship service or rally that roots the work to overcome poverty in religious convictions.

Follow the links below to learn more about "LET JUSTICE ROLL" and for resources for "LET JUSTICE ROLL" events. Want to be part of this growing initiative?

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Sammy Perkins #0319156 (On death row since 12/15/93)
- William Gray #0153856 (12/16/93)
- Terry L/ Ball #0017060 (2/3/94)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606