

June 20, 2010

1 Kings 19:1-8

“Are we going anywhere, if we’re running away?”

When I was a little girl, I was particularly fascinated with the comics. In those long ago days it was not uncommon to find a runaway child featured in the story. The kid would generally have a stick perched over his or her shoulder, with a red bandana tied into a little bundle on the end of the stick. This figure, of the runaway child, always intrigued me. The child represented freedom and independence. I imagined myself free as a bird, traveling across this great country, hopping freight trains, riding the rails, with no one to boss me around. Late in the summer nights, tucked in my bed, with the windows wide open to receive what breeze might be stirring the humid air, I could hear the mournful whistle of trains in the distance. And I pictured myself with my stick over my shoulder, hiking out through the fields to catch the train.

Unfortunately, whenever I did mention running away, my mother invariably told me, “Ok, let me help you pack.” She’d pull out a battered suitcase and rummage in the kitchen to make sandwiches, and it just wasn’t quite the way I pictured it. So, I’d mumble something to my mom and cancel my plans.

This is always true in life. Running away never seems to be glamorous in the end. It doesn’t help us feel free as a bird. Running away is associated with unpleasant feelings: fear, burnout, anger, desperation, pain, despair, embarrassment, confusion. Children playing at “running away” make us smile, but usually running away is nothing to smile at.

Consider some scenarios—these are fictitious, but still true-to-life.

Deanna had just moved with her family to a new home in a new town in a new state. She was beginning high school, and found it immensely difficult to enter the huge double doors the first day. She knew not one soul in the mass of teeming teenage humanity. That first day was awful. No one spoke to her or acknowledged her presence. The second day wasn’t much better. Weeks passed. Deanna became more and more distressed and discouraged. She had enjoyed the speech and drama club in her previous school; but she found herself reluctant to stay for the first meeting of a similar club in her new school. She felt she really had to get home to study that day. And the next meeting found her needing to get home to do the laundry—to help her

parents who both worked full time. And so it went. Deanna's world seemed to shrink and she felt more and more lonely.

Joe was shattered by his wife's announcement that she wanted a divorce. He was not prepared for it, although she had expressed her frustration with their life frequently over the past two years. She had suggested they go to a counselor, but he really felt they were just out to get your money and couldn't accomplish much anyway. He knew his wife was spending more and more time with her friends. He had been angry about that, thinking she probably complained about him when they were together. But he hadn't thought it would really come to this. Joe moved to his own apartment. He went to work. He heated frozen meals in the microwave to eat in front of the TV. He never called any of the people he had considered friends. They were really his wife's friends, and he could see the reproach in their eyes when they met. It seemed everyone thought this was HIS fault. It was too painful to handle. Life seemed to stretch before him interminably, and Joe moved through the days in a fog.

Roy and Sandra couldn't understand it. They had truly tried to be good parents. It didn't make sense. Their daughter, Louisa, had been a delightful child. But since she had turned fourteen and began a relationship with a seventeen year old boyfriend, everything changed. The boy seemed angry at the world, he had dropped out of high school, and the parents suspected he used drugs. And now, it still seemed like a nightmare, but it was true. Every morning when they woke up the truth hit them like a ton of bricks. Louisa had run away with this boy. No one knew where they were. Months had passed with no word. And Roy and Sandra, who had been active in their church and community, stayed home. They stayed home from meetings, special events, even worship. They felt so confused, even guilty and ashamed. It was too hard to face the questions and glances of others. Like Louisa, they too were running away.

Running away. It's painful. And the phrase seems so ironic--- RUNNING--- seems like you ought to feel you're moving, GOING somewhere. That's what made it seem so inviting in the comics. But in reality, it often feels like you're going nowhere--- like you're wandering in circles in the desert, lost in a harsh wilderness, or holed up in some dark cave.

Mentors and supervisors have taught me to ask at such times: "Where is God in the midst of this?" In hard times I have mentally screamed, "I don't

KNOW where God is! I wish I did! Sure seems like he's on a coffee break. It often feels like God is absent in our times of running away.

It is good to remember that we are a people of the Book. Our book is the Bible. The Bible is filled with stories that teach us about God. And our Book today tells us something about running away, and about God's approach to our running away.

Today's Old Testament lesson is from the account of the prophet Elijah. Elijah lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the ninth century before Christ, during the reign of King Ahab. Scripture counts Ahab among the worst of all the kings of the Hebrews. His wife, the foreign princess Jezebel, managed to turn him to her gods, the pagan gods of her homeland.

Elijah denounced this. He said God would show his displeasure by withholding rain—and this came to pass. Elijah, obviously, was not popular after this, and he hid for a time. When he reappeared, it was to display the power of his God, Yahweh, who first dramatically bested the pagan gods, then brought the rain.

The pagan prophets were promptly killed. All this leads to today's reading. Jezebel was not the kind to accept defeat or embarrassment. She threatened to kill Elijah, who turned and ran away. In one fell swoop he was devastated by the awareness that there are no permanent human victories. Discouraged and afraid, he turned and fled into the wilderness.

Elijah felt he had been deserted by God. He saw no way to accomplish the tasks God had given him. How could he be God's prophet, without God's support? How could he go on? Elijah reached the ultimate in running away. He wanted to run away from life, from himself. He no longer wanted to live. He prayed, all alone, in the wilderness, under a lonely broom tree, asking that he might die.

But—just because Elijah couldn't see how he could continue to be God's prophet, didn't mean God gave up on HIM. Even though Elijah was running away, God was turning his flight into something new. Elijah didn't know this, he didn't feel it. He was just plain sick and tired and truly sick of it all. But God was turning Elijah from a fugitive into a pilgrim.

The **first thing** God did was to send Elijah an angel. Angels are messengers from God, who speak to us and act in our lives in God's name. I do believe in angels—especially in the way we are all called to act as agents of God in various situations.

Deanna, the high school freshman, might receive the care of angels. Perhaps in the concern of her parents, through a school counselor, or another student who heard God's call to reach out to this newcomer.

Angels might come to Joe through the call of a friend he considered his wife's, or through the open concern of a co-worker. Roy and Sandra might receive angels through the gentle, persistent, reaching out of church members sensitive to their pain. God sends us angels. Let's not be cynical, but humbly receptive to their care for us.

Second, God acted through the angel to tell Elijah: "Get up and eat." We are required to get up off our backsides and do something. It may take the touch of an angel to get us moving, but we have to do our part after that touch. We need to get up. And then we need to eat. God doesn't ask us to feed **others** in times of deep need. God says, "You need to eat." He wants us to look for nourishment for **ourselves**. We may not need actual FOOD for our bodies—but we need nourishment of many kinds.

That is God's final word to Elijah in today's Scripture. "Elijah, you are running away, yes, but you are, at the same time, beginning a new journey. So eat, to gather strength." God promises Elijah that his life is not going to end under that broom tree. His running away is actually the beginning of a pilgrimage. Elijah is going to a holy place, Horeb, otherwise known as Sinai, the mountain of God.

This Scripture is a word of hope for us. It recognizes that life can be overwhelming to God's people, even (perhaps especially) to those who seek to serve God faithfully. Sometimes we may run away from it all. But even in those times, God is acting. God is acting to send us angels, to call us to eat and be nourished. God is acting to lead us on a new journey, to a holy place. May this word of hope be planted as a seed deep within each one of us here today. Amen.

God is acting to lead us on a new journey.

To begin that journey, the Vision Team helped us identify our mission:

Loving God
Serving Others
Growing Together

That same team helped articulate the vision of where we believe God is leading us:

A hub of Christ-directed activity
Radiating out to the world
From the heart of St Charles.

We DO the mission to REACH the vision.

Brian Harris, Molly Bolz, and Doug Ruth helped a group of over 20 persons identify the goals we believe will help us implement our mission and move forward towards our vision.

(Share information.—Invite signups. Mention Molly’s offer of training.)

Recognize Molly Bolz and Brian Harris—offer thanks!