

Elijah: How God Guides Us II Ki. 1:1-4; Matt. 25:14-30 2/13/22

Last week we began a two-part series on the theatrical Old Testament prophet, Elijah, whose name means, “Yahweh is my God.” He had the dubious job of being a prophet for God during a time when Israel and its leaders had turned away from the Lord in order to worship and follow the popular Canaanite god, Baal. We learned from Elijah’s experience that following the Lord and his values and priorities can be difficult and costly, but we also noted some of the benefits of following the Lord. This week, we’ll continue our study of Elijah, asking the question, “How can I know what God wants of me at this point in my life?” (That’s a rather pertinent question for me right now!)

We begin in II Kings 1:1-4. *After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel. ²(King) Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay injured; so he sent messengers, telling them, “Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this injury.” ³But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, “Get up, go to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?’ ⁴Now therefore thus says the LORD, ‘You shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die.’” So Elijah went. (II Kings 1:1-4)*

King Ahaziah was seriously injured by a fall out of his upper story window. He wants to know if he's going to die, so he sends messengers to ask Baal-zebul, which means "Baal of the flies!" He trusts this god to give him an answer. Meanwhile God sends his angel to Elijah and gives him a very precise message to deliver to the king. *"Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron?"* I love the sarcasm in that quote! And, Elijah is also to tell Ahaziah that, yes, he is going to die. So, Elijah went and did as God had instructed him to do.

There are a bunch of times when God gave very specific instructions to Elijah either directly or through an angel. And God did the same thing with other biblical heroes, including Abraham and Moses, many other prophets, and Peter and Paul in the New Testament. These folks faced many dangers and challenges, but they were very clear about what God expected of them.

How about us? Many of us want to do God's will in our lives, but we aren't clear about what God's will for us is. Where should you go to college? Should you marry? Who and when? Should you have children? What career should you pursue? Should you leave your current job and take another one? When should you retire? Many of us, myself included, would have appreciated some direct guidance on these matters, but it just

didn't come! But if direct guidance came to so many biblical characters, then why not to us? What's the problem?

First of all, biblical characters didn't receive direct guidance from God all the time. Listen to these closing words from Paul's first letter to Christians in Corinth, Greece about his plans to visit them. ⁵*I will visit you after passing through Macedonia—for I intend to pass through Macedonia—* ⁶*and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go.* ⁷*I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.* ⁸*But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost,* ⁹*for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. (I Cor. 16:5-9)*

Notice the tentative language. "*I intend to pass through Macedonia...perhaps I will stay with you...I hope to spend time with you...if the Lord permits." Clearly, Paul didn't have any direct guidance from the Lord about what he was supposed to do next! He just made decisions based on the best information that he had. In this case, he decided to remain in Ephesus, because there was an opening for ministry there. Perhaps the instances of God's direct intervention with heroes of the faith are recorded in the Bible precisely because they are so unusual! I don't think that we should usually expect God to tell us exactly what to do when*

we face important decisions. Instead, like Paul, most of the time we just make the best decision we can with the information we have.

Now I know this is at odds with a lot of popular Christian teaching that says we should expect God to guide us through coincidences, a word spoken by someone, a chance reading of a Bible verse, or a strong inner feeling. But my experience in over 40 years of church ministry is that these kinds of subjective guidance are risky and unreliable, because they can easily be tainted by our own hopes and desires!

I once counseled a couple whose marriage was hanging by a thread after only six months together! It was clear to me that they were not well-suited for each other, and that neither of them had the emotional maturity to sustain a marriage. I asked them why they had gotten married in the first place. They told me that God had told them to marry. Well, actually, God just told the woman that they should marry! But the man believed her and agreed to marry her! I pushed her about exactly how God had told her to get married. She said she just knew it deep down in her heart. Hmmm. I think those kinds of feelings are nice, and we should pay attention to them, but they are not to be regarded as God speaking to us! Sadly, the couple divorced a few months later.

Instead of expecting God to somehow tell us what to do, maybe we should consider Jesus' parables about stewardship. There are several of

them. In Matt. 25, he tells the story of a wealthy man who goes on a journey, entrusting different amounts of his enormous wealth to three servants who were expected to manage it while he was away. So they did. When he returned, there was a time of reckoning. The first servant had parlayed the initial 5-talent investment into 10 talents, equivalent to about 150 years of a laborer's wages! He was nicely rewarded. The second servant took his 2 talents and turned them into 4 talents. He was also rewarded. But the third servant, knowing that the master was a harsh man, was afraid and buried his one talent in the ground, rather than risk losing any of it. The wealthy man was angry at this servant for being lazy and took his investment away and sent the servant away, too.

There are a number of applications of this parable, but what I'd like to point out is that the servants were free to choose how to manage what had been entrusted to them, knowing the character and expectations of their master. They didn't expect- and didn't receive- exact instructions about how to manage the money. It was their job to figure that out. And I think that may be a good model for Christian decision-making. Rather than expecting God to send us some kind of sign or inner feeling, perhaps we should do all we can to learn about the Lord's priorities and values and then use whatever God has entrusted to us to the best of our abilities, be

that our time, talent, temperament, or treasure. And then we pray for God's wisdom in making our decisions, and decide.

When I was deciding whether to come to GPC 13 years ago, I wasn't sure whether this would be a good match or not. I had some other options, or I could have stayed where I was in Virginia. So, I did my research. I studied the annual reports of the church and the reports of the church to the General Assembly. I contacted the previous pastor and the interim pastor. I talked with the Presbytery Executive. I met with Lou and Candace, pastors with whom I would be working. I spoke with people who knew me, asking for their advice. And I talked a lot with Bonnie, because the decision would affect her deeply! Of course, I also prayed that God would help me to see the situation clearly and would give me wisdom.

All of this information led me to believe that GPC would be a good fit for me and that I could be helpful to God's work here in Gettysburg. So I accepted the invitation to come. In retrospect, I believe that God was indeed calling me here, and I'm very glad I came! But often, it is only in retrospect that we can see God's hand at work in our decisions. At least that's been my experience.

When Bonnie and I took a tour of Italy, our tour group was often swamped in crowds of hundreds or even thousands of other tourists, especially in places like Vatican City and Venice. So each tour guide had a

colored flag or umbrella that they would raise up high in the air. Our guide had a big red umbrella. We didn't know exactly where we were going, but we learned to follow that umbrella through the crowds until we could all assemble once again for further instructions. It worked remarkably well.

I wonder if God's guidance is a little like that. We often don't know exactly where we're headed, but if we seek to follow God's priorities in our lives- loving God and neighbor, using our gifts to further God's kingdom here on earth- if we follow those things, we probably won't get too lost. And God can always intervene directly with us if he needs to- by sending an angel, speaking from a burning bush, or giving us a vision- like he did with those biblical characters! But absent a direct word from the Lord, we make the best decision we can with the information available to us.

How do you think God guides us? What has your experience been?