



August 10, 2008

“Listen for the Word of the Lord”

Jacqueline Decker Vanderpol

Matthew 14:22-33

I Kings 19:9-18

There are times when the adage that everything you need to know you learn in kindergarten doesn't seem that far from the mark. It's hard to argue with sharing or with the importance of washing your hands after using the bathroom. There are a number of adults I would love to put down for naps around 3:00pm in the hope of making this world a less crabby place. I believe a snack of apples and raisins would help with this as well. The maxims may be simple, but they are also basic, common sense life skills that overly-sophisticated people known as adults sometimes believe ourselves to have outgrown.

As a once kindergarten teacher at a private Jewish school, my sister quickly learned that in addition to their sleep schedules and hygiene routines, the simple wisdom of children unassumingly seeps into their spiritual lives. In the midst of their youthful simplicity, she often found deep profundity and comical authenticity – such as the day she was standing to the side of the playground on recess duty and witnessed two boys get into a skirmish over a toy. When it became clear to the pursuer that the owner

was not about to share, he did not take his grievance to my sister and implore her to enforce justice. Instead, my sister watched as the young boy walked to the middle of the playground, and in a one-man religious performance lamented to God, “Hashem?” To which the boy, playing the part of God, replied, “Yes?” “Hashem?” “Yes?” “Hashem, Eliazar won't let me play with his car!” “Yes.” Perhaps it was enough to know that he tattled on the offending party to a power higher than my sister, perhaps the public lament was more satisfying than temporary ownership of the car, perhaps he reluctantly admitted that Hashem wasn't going to intervene with anything more than an acknowledging “yes,” but after lodging his complaint the boy promptly returned to the business of eating his lunchables and trying to sort through this skirmish on his own. He did not force the issue; he did not manufacture his own response and try to pass it off as the word of Hashem; he relented to the silence and sank back into the realities of his young life.

In a society where we can seemingly be in touch with anyone, anywhere, anytime, where Madonna keeps her blackberry under her pillow so she can check email as it arrives at two in the morning, where teenagers carry on simultaneous conversations with family over the dinner table and with friends through a flurry of acronym-filled text messages, delayed communication is becoming more than an inconvenience. It is becoming downright indefensible. So when God, who really should be accessible from anywhere at anytime, fails to get back to us promptly, we don't waste our time. We move on. Because who hasn't thrown a lament to heaven – a grievance about how someone has treated you, a plea for peace during a rough patch in the path, a polite prodding for a situation to be other than it is, a sincere questioning about the goings-on of this life or this world? And who hasn't stood, face turned upward, waiting for a reply? As with sharing our toys or washing our hands, we seem to have learned

long ago how to respond to the silence. We rarely force the issue; we usually don't manufacture our own response; we simply get back to trying to sort things through on our own.

And as we take care of business on our own, we usually do quite well: we live well and love well and work well. Our children are well-adjusted, and our pets are well trained, and we begin to think, "Well, I really can do this on my own." Because the truth is that since the silence, we really haven't given God much thought at all, and life has continued just fine. The truth is, for most of us, life is far better than just fine. And to be truthful, although we would rarely admit this to anyone, there are times it seems, in large part, due to us: to our hard work, to our deep commitment, to our willingness to be flexible or our capacity to be understanding of others. We know ourselves to be at least partners in our lives successes. Certainly, none of this would have happened if we had stayed at home on the couch. So, in those heady moments when we are clicking on all cylinders, when we are achieving our goals and exceeding others' expectations, it is no wonder that it begins to feel a little like we can walk on water. And that's exactly when we're sunk. Just ask Peter.

It's the moment that you think, "*I'm really doing this!*" Or you muse to yourself, "if only others in the company put in the hours I do, they would have climbed this far this fast." Or, "isn't it sad that others don't work as hard for their marriage as we work for ours." Or, when you roll your eyes at a terrible-two tantrum in a restaurant and question what's happened to parenting skills in this new generation. It's the moment you fan the flames with the belief that yours are the only resources brought to bear on your successes that you can almost feel the water creeping up around your knees. But for most of us the temptations of self-sufficiency and the drenched flailings of its downfall are far more subtle than those of an ENRON CEO.

Instead, we're like the woman who feels the 20 year coin in her pocket and thinks, "surely after this long I have it under control. I can handle just one drink, and it is a family wedding after all."

We're like the always-independent elderly person who feels his vision slipping, his response time lagging but doesn't relinquish his car keys because he doesn't want to be a burden on his kids. You know, a parent is supposed to look after his kids, not the other way around.

We're like the young mother who pulls at her hair as she wonders, "He's only a baby and doesn't know any better, so why do I get so angry when he won't sleep? I've succeeded at more than this at work. If I can handle that, I can handle this small child without running to someone else for help."

We're like the manager, always in charge, who wrestles with whether to seek help for his depression, not because he doubts that he has it, but because he wonders what his employees would think if they ever found out he had to take medication, if they knew he couldn't do it all on his own.

But, here's the secret: all of us sink. None of us walk on water. All of us wear devils on our shoulders who if we give an inch will take far more than a mile. All of us want to stay independent forever and none of us ever will. All of us love our kids, and all of us want to throw them out the window on occasion. All of us closet a weakness we believe others could never accept if they knew the truth. Often, the greatest danger is not doubting that God can help us, but is doubting that we could ever sink in the first place.

And that is when we morph from being Peter to being Elijah – Elijah who is holed up in his cave pouting that he has been so successful, so faithful and that no one has lavished praise on him for it. Pouting, that there continue to be challenges in life even though he is doing his best. Pouting, that he is working so hard and no one even recognizes that he's doing it all on his own.

He is so caught up in his own self-righteous indignation at his underappreciated self-sufficiency that God speaks through a wind and an earthquake and a fire – speaks so powerfully that the earth itself follows God’s presence with the sound of sheer silence – and Elijah hears the silence only as the opportunity to reiterate his same complaints.

Elijah complained; God spoke; Elijah complained again. Perhaps it is the same with us. Perhaps as we throw our laments to heaven, it is not that God responds with silence but that we are listening for the silence, for the opportunity to reiterate and restate, to move on when all we hear is all we are listening for. But, God returns and speaks again – to Elijah and to us – follows us on the playground as we get back to doing business our way, to sorting out our own skirmishes, as we try to pretend that we aren’t dogpaddling to keep our heads above water. And God asks, “You of little faith, why did you doubt? Doubt that you are human? That you can sink? That I am God? Why didn’t you doubt that you can do this on your own – without me, without each other?”

And then we are silent. Like the wind after the storm on the boat. Like the sound of sheer silence after God’s presence to Elijah. We are silent. Because we realize that now it’s our turn to be quiet and this time to really listen for the word of the Lord. Amen.