

On the Move
I Kings 19:1-13
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Elijah just had the greatest mountain-top experience you can imagine. He demonstrated with great certainty and before the entire assembled nation, that he was right. Imagine that. With all the forces of Ahab and Jezebel's empire conspiring against him, when that fire fell on the altar, the people had solid evidence that what Elijah was saying was the truth and that what everyone else in power was saying was false. I can't even begin to dream what that experience would be like. Public, visible, certain confirmation that you are right! How exciting would that be? After that, surely it would be easy to get your way?

Wrong. Elijah's victory was short-lived. Jezebel, humiliated and angry, set out to destroy him. And Elijah, filled with fear, ran off into the desert to die. Fear became self-loathing, as he considered himself a failure and believed that he was the only one who still worshiped God.

We've all had experiences like Elijah had out there under the broom tree. Uncertain of the future. Afraid of what might happen to us. Beating ourselves up for not being as good or successful as we think we ought to be. Thinking that we are failure. Thinking that we are alone and that no one understands us, no one is there for us, no one can help us right now.

Elijah, out there under the broom tree, experienced a pretty extreme example of a faith and identity crisis.

Then an angel appeared and told him to "Get up and eat. Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." Elijah then traveled to Mt. Horeb to await a message from God; he put himself in a place where he could receive the help he needed.

We can't just sit around in our uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. No, we've got to get up, find nurture, and then set out on a journey, expecting a word from God.

Elijah arrived at this sacred place and waited for God to speak. And what happened? First, there was a great wind, and then an earthquake, and then fire, but God was not in any of these. Of course, God had used all of these before. God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, appeared to the people of Israel on Mt. Sinai during an earthquake, and led the people through the wilderness as a pillar of fire.

But on that day, God did not appear in any of these ways. Right then, Elijah didn't need any more drama. What Elijah needed was peace and silence. He need gentleness and comfort. And that's how God appeared.

Back in the fall of 2004, while I was still Associate Pastor at Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, similar to Elijah, I was uncertain of my future. Was I going to stay at Royal Lane or look for some other job? Was I going to stay in ministry or seek some other career? Was I

going to stay in Dallas, move home to Oklahoma, or go someplace else? There were many questions, and no answers were apparent to me.

Throughout 2004 I had slowly been coming out to more and more people, yet I was still living in the closet in much of my professional life. When I was around those people who knew it was wonderful. Those were times of freshness and life when I could be open about myself. But through much of my professional life I had to act, to fake it, and even sometimes to lie. This weighed heavily upon me.

It was a time of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. I didn't know the path ahead and was unsure of what the right thing to do was. Let me be clear; I didn't think there was one and only one path that I had to discern. I believed then and still do, that there were many good outcomes that were possible. I just had to be open to those possibilities.

At the time I began to pray a simple prayer asking God to make clear the options for me to explore. But I also told God that these options would have to be obvious, like hitting me over the head, because I was in such a confused state that I didn't trust my normal processes for making such decisions. Here's what happened.

In January 2005, Scot Pankey, then the youth minister at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas began to explore options for taking the CoH youth group to summer camp. Scot had grown up and worked in Southern Baptist churches and knew that baptists did great youth camps, but he wondered if there were liberal options. So, Scot searched for a church which was a member of the Alliance of Baptists. The Alliance broke away from the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980's after the fundamentalist takeover. The Alliance is very liberal and has taken strong pro-gay stances. They are also in partnership with the United Church of Christ and many Alliance churches are dually aligned.

On the Alliance website, Scot discovered Highland Park Baptist Church in Austin. Scot didn't know anyone at Highland Park, but he called and asked to speak to the youth minister. The youth minister at that time was the Rev. Dan DeLeon. Dan is one of my best friends in ministry and is now a UCC pastor in College Station, Texas.

Dan told Scot Pankey all about the Southwest Baptist Youth Camping Association, and Scot was excited. The SWBYCA is a group of mostly moderate baptist churches, predominately in Texas, that have done youth camp together for about sixty years. Dan said he'd talk to some others and get back with Scot. After a few phone calls, Scot was invited to our planning meeting in Austin, just a few weeks away, and it was determined that he'd drive down from Dallas to Austin with me.

Just so you get how improbable the story is to this point, think for a moment. The world's largest gay church was talking to a group of Texas baptists about coming to their youth camp.

When Scot Pankey and I were driving to that camp planning meeting, I began to tell him about the uncertainty I was facing and what was going on in my life around my coming out. Suddenly, Scot said, "Did you know that our church in Oklahoma City is looking for a pastor? You'd be perfect for that job."

Scot immediately called Jo Hudson, senior minister of the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, and told her about me. Jo wanted to meet me within the next week. It just so happened that the very next day I was planning to attend a conference at the Cathedral of Hope, a building I

had never been to before. Jo and I met the next day and scheduled a more formal conversation.

When I met with Jo, we sat down in her office, and she said, “Before I hear anything about you, let me tell you what we are looking for. We want someone who is liberal in theology, from an evangelical worship background, who would be willing to live in Oklahoma, and can speak to Oklahomans in their cultural context.”

Well, folks, sometimes we are hit upside the head.

That is the story of how I came to be part of the United Church of Christ.

I do not believe that everything happens for a reason. Nor do I believe that there is one path in life which we must walk in order to remain within the will of God. But I do believe that God works with us, helping us to figure out our way.

I do believe that we are each on a spiritual journey and that with open hearts and curious minds we learn from one another and help one another as we grow in our faith and understanding.

We help one another grow in our faith by caring for one another in our time of need. We do that by forming lasting connections with other people. We do that by empowering each other to explore every angle, welcome new ideas, and become our best selves.

We gather with other people who believe and think differently than we do and together, in conversation, we learn. This particular congregation thrives on thoughtful dialogue about what contemporary Christian faith really means for each of us. We invite everyone with an open mind and an open heart to come see what is happening here. We are thoughtful people, together on a spiritual journey.

In that wonderful novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis tells the story of Narnia, a magical land trapped in an evil curse, longing to be set free with divine love. You see, Narnia has suffered under a long winter which has lasted many years. This apparently permanent winter was the result of a curse put upon the land by the White Witch. And in one of my favourite moments in the story, that curse begins to break.

Frightened and cold, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver and the Pevensie children, Peter, Susan, and Lucy, are fleeing across Narnia, attempting to escape the Witch and her wolves, when they begin to notice little things: a few degrees of warmth, the drip of melting water, the tops of grass poking through the snow, eventually the bloom of a crocus. These are signs that the Witch’s power is being broken by an even greater power. Those first little signs of new life burst forth into overwhelming, spontaneous glory. In the matter of a few hours the land passes from the wintry depths of January to the fresh beauties of May.

And when they saw the very first of those little signs of beauty, in a moment otherwise filled with doubt and fear, they proclaim “Aslan is on the move!” Aslan, the Great Lion, is the Christ figure in the story, the embodiment of grace, compassion, and all that is noble and good and true.

I’ve always liked that phrase, “Aslan is on the move.” When we are uncertain, anxious, or afraid. When we are doubting ourselves, or struggling to make an important decision. When we don’t know what is the right thing to do in a given circumstance. Then, let’s look for

those little signs. The evidence that goodness and truth and beauty and love are “on the move” in our lives.

This spiritual family at First Central is on the move. We are dynamic and visionary in our effort to follow God’s mission. We care for each other, learn from each other, are authentic with each other. This family of thoughtful people together on a spiritual journey is changing lives. And I am convinced on this journey together we have the chance to discover our best selves.