

C Lectionary 13 6.26.22

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Focus Statement: God meets us in the past and calls us forward to a new future.

Guys, we get Elijah again. If you were here last week, you might remember me lamenting that the lectionary left off the part where God gave Elijah a disciple, someone whom he could train up and prepare to take over his ministry for him. In a move serving to tongue-tie preachers for the rest of time, that person's name was Elisha. Elijah and Elisha, yeah, we could have made that simpler. But anyway. Elisha joined Elijah after Elijah's big meltdown following Jezebel's threat. And for the rest of First Kings, they were inseparable. With Elisha in tow, Elijah got back to his no-nonsense prophet of God ways, speaking tough truths to King Ahab and any other leader who acted against God's purpose. Now, as Second Kings starts, we find the end of Elijah's time as a prophet drawing near. Elijah, fun fact, is one of only two characters in the Old Testament who don't die, but instead are taken up to heaven by God. The other is this minor character in Genesis named Enoch, who walked with God until the day when he walked so far that when the time came to go home, God invited Enoch instead to stay at God's house that night, and Enoch was taken up to heaven. But that's another sermon for another day. Today we have Elijah.

The text tells us that when Elijah's time to be taken up drew near, he and Elisha were on their way to Gilgal. Gilgal is an important symbolic location for the Israelites for two reasons, it was where Joshua first led them from the Exodus and into the promised land, and, quite a bit later, it was where Saul was named the first king of Israel, to the people's great rejoicing. Elijah tried to leave Elisha here, Elisha refused. They next went on to Bethel, also a symbolic location, the border of the Northern kingdom and a symbol of a

fractured people. Again, Elijah tried to leave Elisha here, again Elisha refused. Then the lectionary has us skip these verses, but the two next went to on to Jericho. Jericho represented Israel's faithfulness and unity, remember how they marched around the city and the walls fell. It also represented their arrogance, Ahab lived there. And again, Elijah tried to leave Elisha, and again Elisha refused. Finally, they went on to the Jordan River. The Jordan a place of great cultural and theological significance. It is a place of boundary crossing, a place of transition, of new beginnings. One last time, Elijah tried to leave Elisha behind, and one last time Elisha refused.

So, Elijah took his mantle—a mantle is a cloak or shawl that represented one's position as a prophet, rolled it up and struck the water. In an echo of Moses, the water parted, and Elijah and Elisha walked on dry land to the other side. As they stood on the far shore, Elijah asked Elisha, "tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you?" To which Elisha responded, "give me a double share of your spirit." This feels like both a huge honor and a huge ask. I think of the people who have mentored me in my life, and I aspire to be half as good at what they do, twice as good seems like too much. But this is what Elisha asked for, let me be twice as good, twice as wise, twice as prophetic, twice the leader, that you are. Elijah paused, "you have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." And they kept walking. And "as they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind... Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!'" You said I have to see you being taken up, and I see you being taken up, is the message here.

When it was over and Elijah had gone into heaven, Elisha first tore his clothes in two, a sign of grief at the time. Then he picked up the mantle of Elijah. He struck the water as Elijah had done, the waters parted, and he went on his way.

What we see in this transition of prophetic leadership is how what came before is not lost or abandoned in change, but neither is it clung onto. Elijah was a prophet of his time; Elisha will be the prophet of his. Together they journeyed through Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho to the Jordan, tracing major steps in Israel's history. When Elijah was taken up, Elisha put on Elijah's own mantle, a mantle heavy with prophetic authority, rich with that whole history, and carried it into this new future. There will be echoes in this future of the work Elijah started, Elisha will complete the anointing of new leadership, and in Elisha's ministry there will be fire from the heavens, prophetic declarations, and his own departure in a proverbial blaze of glory, just like Elijah's. But it will also be different, a prophetic leadership marked both by Elijah's legacy and Elisha's own skills, gifts, and experiences. A leadership ready to face the new challenges of a new time, a time different from the one which Elijah was sent to speak into.

I've been thinking a lot about transitions recently, because we're in one. I mean, we're always in one, and at Trinity I think we've honestly had the gift other congregations haven't, in that we've known for a long time that the way church used to be is not the way church will be any longer. We've been leading the curve on that for a while. But Covid gave us this really hard, obvious reset point, where things were one way in March of 2020, and

then in the span of like three days they were entirely different. And now as we're starting to find ourselves on the other side of whatever the last two years were—covid is not gone yet but things are decidedly closer to something resembling “normal” than they've been in a while—we're starting to have to look around and ask the question, what was that? And, more importantly, where to do we go from here?

And what I think we take from Elijah's passing of the mantle to Elisha is that we go forward. We honor the past, we remember the past, but we don't live in the past. Who we were in March of 2020 was great, it was a church doing really great ministry. But who we are now, the ministry we are called to now, is different ministry, because the world is different.

To switch tracks a little bit, our Gospel reading finds Jesus also refocusing his ministry. Prior to chapter nine, Jesus' ministry had been to the Galilee. Now, the text tells, the days were drawing near for him to be taken up—note a bit of an Elijah allusion there—and so he set his face to go to Jerusalem. That's where we're headed from here on out. Jerusalem. Luke takes us on a meandering path there, because he's Luke, but Jesus' focus never wavers.

The first place they try to enter is a village of Samaritans, but that did not go well. When they were rejected, James and John asked Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down and consumer them?” I've always read this question as James and John, nicknamed the Sons of Thunder in other Gospels, trying to throw their weight around. But the commentary I was reading this week posed that the tone of this question could have

been cautious, “do you want us to command fire to consume them? Is that the kind of God you are?” Whether the question was asked with bravado or fear, Jesus’ response was the same. No, that is not the kind of mission this is, that is not the kind of savior I am.” It’s also worth noting, this is the first appearance of the Samaritans in Luke, it will not be the last. In just a couple weeks we’ll read the parable of the Good Samaritan, an example of neighborliness. And in Acts, the Good News will quickly spread through Samaria on its way to the whole world. The rejection described in this passage is the first word on the Samaritans, not the last. There is always time for a change of direction.

Then we go on to meet three would-be followers of Jesus. The first seems like he’s probably friends with Peter, he’s such a little eager beaver, “Lord I’ll follow you ANYWHERE.” Jesus, knowing where they’re actually going, questioned him. Will you really? The second two Jesus invited to follow, and both were willing, but first had obligations to fulfill. Good obligations, let’s be clear. These weren’t cop-out excuses. There was an obligation to care for one’s parents in life, through death, and to their burial. And saying goodbye to one’s family, who could be against that? But Jesus seems to be. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

And here’s where I tell you all, I don’t know what Jesus was saying here. I don’t even really want to venture a guess. Not caring for your family seems to conflict with other things Jesus said, so I have a hard time saying, leave your loved ones behind is the right solution here. But I think it’s ok that this passage makes us, or makes me at least, uncomfortable. I

think it's supposed to make us uncomfortable. I think it's supposed to challenge us. To take the past, to learn from it, to honor it, but not to live in it.

Dear people of God, Elijah was a great prophet, one of the greatest prophets. Part of his legacy was not only his work as a prophet, but in calling and training Elisha in such a way that Elisha could follow him to the edge and beyond, and when Elijah's time ended to pick up his mantle and move forward. Because Elijah's time had passed, and it was Elisha's time now. Who we were too has passed, and who we are to be is beginning. The legacy of who we have been remains with us, the mantle on our shoulders into new and important work. Like Elisha, we only see hints of its unfolding. A few clearly unfinished projects, but much unknown. What we do know, what we can trust, is that God walks with us, purposefully and actively into this new future, whatever it is. Feel the comforting weight of that mantle on your shoulders as you strain forward into this new future. It is the weight of God's presence. Amen.