

C Lectionary 14 6.30.19

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Focus Statement: God has a future for us.

Once again these children's bulletins we have are sort of hilariously unintentionally perceptive this week. The inside is a picture with the disciples on one side and the three potential followers on the other, with Jesus in the center, and sure they're all cartoons, but everyone looks a little bit confused. Which, fair enough, this passage is a bit of a doozy. Luke's Gospel is known for Jesus' special attention to the outsiders of the community, but here we have Jesus sounding much more like the Jesus from John's gospel with these very metaphoric lines like "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests," and "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Pair that with the laundry list of works of the flesh which are antithetical to inheriting the kingdom of God, and there's a lot going on this morning.

To make matters weirder, our Gospel ended with Jesus saying "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God," and then the lectionary paired it with an Old Testament reading where Elijah was taken up to heaven in chariots of fire, while his chosen successor Elisha ran along the ground, staring into the sky as instructed, yelling, "father, father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And that's the semicontinuous reading; it isn't even necessarily supposed to line up with the Gospel themes. The thematic Old Testament reading is even more jarringly opposite. We didn't read that one, but it's also a story of Elijah and Elisha. That one recounting when Elijah first chose Elisha as his successor. Elijah came across Elisha in a field and placed his mantle over him, designating him as his successor. A mantle, by the way is like a robe or coat that

designated Elijah as a prophet. Elisha replied to this grand gesture, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elisha went home to his family, killed and cooked his oxen, throwing a big final party for his family, and then he went and followed Elijah.

That’s the pairing of stories we have this morning. Jesus told his followers, “Let the dead bury their own,” and “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back,” meanwhile Elisha returned home, threw a party, and then followed Elijah. Then later he chased after Elijah as he ascended upward, after which he took on Elijah’s own mantle and his ministry. And since we are lectionary people—which means we read the whole bible, not just the parts we like—we’re stuck figuring out what these readings all have to say to us.

That’s what I’ve been thinking about all week, Elijah and Elisha are heroes of the prophets and Jesus is, well, Jesus, so how do we make sense of these two seemingly contradictory responses to discipleship. It occurred to me that what these three stories all have in common is they are all about what it means to be a follower of someone, what it means to carry on not just someone else’s legacy but more importantly the work of the Kingdom of God. That’s the end result of all of these stories. Elisha became Elijah’s successor. Our Gospel passage started, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up” taken up referring to Jesus’ death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension, “when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This line is meant to illustrate Jesus’ single-minded devotion to his mission. From here on out he is on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross, and he’s using what little time he has left to make

sure his disciples are as ready as they can possibly be to carry on his mission in his absence. Even the Galatians text is not about how one gets freedom; it is about how we are to live now that we already have it.

That right there is the biggest good news statement I take from all four of these readings this morning. We have a future. And not only do we have a future, but God cares about how we live in that future, God cares that that future is good and rich and life-giving. And, God is so determined to move us into that future, that God has a whole host of ways to move us forward. How we follow God into this new future is situational, that's one of the things I take from these four very different readings. God is not confined to one way of moving us, but many. This is a bit of an aside, but do you all remember that Footprints poem that was really popular a few years ago. The one where the man had a dream where he was walking along the beach with the Lord, and he looked back at the footprints in the sand and noticed that in the most difficult times of his life there was only one set of footprints. He asked Jesus why Jesus had left him in those times, and Jesus replied he hadn't left him; those had been the times where Jesus had carried him. A pastor friend posted a comic that has an extension to that, where Jesus, after saying the whole "it was then I carried you" bit, goes on to add, "that long line is where I dragged you for a while. And over there, where there's no footprints, that's where I hid you behind that sand bank while I went to get a hot dog." It's a joke, but I think there's truth there as well. We have a future, God is going to get us into that future, whatever it takes. The one who has been with us since before time began certainly isn't giving up on the project of humanity now.

So what does all this mean today, for us, for the people of Trinity, a small, struggling, but strong and determined congregation on the edge of a small, struggling, but strong and determined neighborhood, in a small, struggling, but strong and determined town. First off, I think it means that we need to have a sense of urgency. Jesus' words to these would-be followers were urgent, because the time was short. And we too need to have a sense of urgency.

I think it also means that we cannot wait until we are completely ready before we move. I was thinking about the man who asked to bury his father, and I realized, the text doesn't specify if his father is even dead yet. Life expectancies in the first century were short because of childhood illnesses and the risk of women in childbirth, but if this man's father was forty, he could well live to be eighty. Jesus didn't have forty years to sit around waiting for this guy's father to finally reach a ripe old age and die. We don't know how long Jesus had, Luke's Gospel is notorious sketchy on timing, but probably no more than weeks. I have a note taped to the computer screen in my office that reads "Begin before you are ready." I put it there in my first couple months of ministry, because I realized I was spending so much time making sure I knew everything that I wasn't actually getting anything done. If I waited until I knew everything I needed to know in order to properly and effectively lead this congregation, we'd close our doors or at best I'd retire before we got around to any actual ministry. We just don't have that kind of time. So I stopped waiting until I knew what I was doing, and we did stuff. Now, in fairness, some things I wished I'd waited a little longer and learned a little more first, the on-going saga of the flat roof being a classic example. But honestly, as much of a headache as that is, and as much as

I wished I'd known then what I know now, I don't regret it. Because getting that done was our first big win in terms of getting the building back on its feet again. We got that done, and we realized we could, and we replaced the furnaces, and we fixed the pitched roof, and we spruced up the exterior, and we painted the whole interior and got new carpet in the office wing. All stuff this building desperately needed, that we just needed to take the risk and do. And we did it. And financially, no, we're not better off then we were when I got here five years ago, but even with all that outlay of money, we're not really any worse either. And we don't have to remember our baptism during communion anymore. We do still sometimes get to remember it in the kitchen, but we're working on that...

So we need to take risks, we need to move forward. We cannot get caught up in past failures, we need to jump before we really know where we might land. But I don't think that means we are to disregard our history and leap blindly forward. Elisha took on the mantle of Elijah, he followed in the footsteps of his predecessor. And Jesus was calling these people to be followers, to learn from him, not to go out and just be him on their own. I am grateful for the history of this congregation as a place that cares about justice and believes in practicing its faith in action in love for Battle Creek and especially for this neighborhood. This is a congregation with a history of working, and of strength, and of some prickliness, sure, but of good hearts and hard work and devotion to God and God's people. That's a legacy we can and should be proud of, and a legacy to build on.

All this to say, I don't know what we're doing, you don't know what we're doing, but we need to be doing something. The time is short, the work is urgent. This neighborhood

needs us to show up, to be God to them, with them, for the sake of God's kingdom. If you're new to this community, or fairly new, I'm so glad you're here, because we need you. We need your new ideas, we need your fresh perspective. It's easy to get caught up in what we've tried before and what used to work, and didn't, and lose sight of the new thing God is doing right now. And if you've been part of Trinity since Moses was a member of the choir, oh man, we need you too. We need, like Elisha asked of Elijah, a double share of your wisdom. We need to know what you know, we need to learn from your experience, we need your leadership. It's a hard ask, like Elijah said, I know, but this is no time to retire. We need you.

Dear people of God. The work of discipleship is hard, the stakes are high, and the time is urgent. But we know, because we are a resurrection people, that God has a future to us, that there is more for us to do, and that we have been set free not from something but for something. So let us move forward into this new future, into this new work, to which God is calling us. It is, as it always is, a great time to be the people of God. Amen.