

“Following God to an Unnamed Place”
2 Kings 2:1-12
February 15, 2015, Transfiguration Sunday
W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

We have two mysterious scripture readings this morning. Not the usual story about Jesus preaching to the crowds or talking to the disciples, not even a parable where he explains who your neighbor is by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. No, the New Testament story takes Jesus and three of his most trusted disciples up an unnamed mountain where they have a mystical experience. It gives me chills and not only because of the high mountain air but chills to think about encountering Moses and Elijah—the two greatest figures from the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses the Law giver and champion of God’s people through forty years of struggle to get from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land and Elijah the prophet who stood up to Ahab and Jezebel and faced down 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah who fled for his life when Jezebel threatened to kill him and after 40 days in the wilderness heard God’s voice in the sheer silence of a cave.

What is God up to in these stories? Why has God sent Jesus and his disciple friends up a high mountain to meet with Moses and Elijah? Why are Jesus’ clothes dazzling white? Why did God speak from a cloud saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him?” If we had experienced that we would probably call it a “God moment.” It would be a moment when we were reasonably sure that God had spoken.

Have you ever experienced anything like that? It’s okay to say yes. It is in the Bible for goodness sake. One of the speakers I heard last week in Florida said over 40% of people living in North America have had such an experience. However, they are afraid to say anything to even family members or close friends because they think the person will think they are crazy. How long do you think that took? Maybe a minute ... maybe 30 seconds ... for the whole event with the appearance of Moses/Elijah, the dazzling clothes, the cloud and voice from God. Those moments don’t last long. The man went on to tell us he has had three of these moments in his life when he felt the near presence of God. Three moments that lasted total all three for no more than 30 seconds. Yet, those moments changed his life.

In these moments we can see the ending of what was and the not yet of what will be. The ending of what was. Jesus and his disciples were good Jews and they continued to worship in the synagogue and temple while following Jesus. But after his death and resurrection there was no need to go to the synagogue or temple. For they would meet God in Jesus and Jesus would help with the forgiveness of their sins. Think about that. Their whole way of acting as good Jews was going to change. It was the end of what was and the “what will be” had not yet quite arrived.

The story is in-between times ... between what was and what will be.

And that is where the 2 Kings story finds us as well. Elijah and his apprentice Elisha are on a journey. It was the time when God was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind. Wow!

Do you have a picture of that scene of a chariot of fire with horses pulling it swooping down from the clouds and picking Elijah up and taking him off to heaven as a startled Elisha looks on? It's quite a picture isn't it! Another story that gives me goose bumps when I think of it. This is not an ordinary story either. It is not about winning a contest with pagan priests, not a battle between Jacob and his brother Esau, not an argument between David and Joab over how to treat a rebellious son, Absalom. Those are all compelling stories but what we have here in this event of Elijah being taken up to heaven and Elisha replacing him as prophet ... this story is as startling as the Transfiguration of Jesus.

The two of them, Elijah and Elisha, are on a road trip. Elijah was the great prophet who had spoken the word of the Lord for many years. Elisha was his apprentice and the person who might succeed him as the next prophet of God. Elijah had not been an easy man to get along with. He often brought a blunt Word of the Lord to those who sought his counsel. One king on hearing that a man had declared that he, the king, would soon surely die, asked, "what sort of man came to meet you and told you these things?" They answered, "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "Oh, it is Elijah the Tishbite." No other description was necessary. He was known by his rough appearance throughout the land.

Elijah and Elisha were on a road trip one we might call an "A" list tour today. They start at Gilgal the place where the Israelites had encamped once they had crossed the Jordan River under Joshua. Here they had come together as a people and built up their strength. Elijah says to his apprentice Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha says, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." Now, that is a strange answer isn't it? Your mentor says "Stay" and you say "I will not leave you." Apparently Elisha knows more than meets the eye.

And so they journey to Bethel. Here Abraham had built an altar when he first came into this land. Later Jacob would sleep here and encounter God through the "Ladder from Heaven" story, surely God was in this place. It was now a worship center where the northern tribes would worship and sacrifice to God.

As you might expect there were other professional prophets at Bethel. They came out to see Elijah and Elisha and said to Elisha, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" and Elisha said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." The mystery deepens a little. It is not just a road trip they are on ... it is Elijah's last day on earth. Again we are between what was and what will be. Elijah's term of office as Prophet is ending and no one knows for sure who the next prophet will be and whether the Spirit of the Lord will reside on the new prophet? It was a real time of angst for the religious community. Elijah says to Elisha, "Stay here, for I am to journey on to Jericho." and Elisha says again, "No."

They have the same experience at Jericho the next stop on their tour of famous place. Jericho was the scene of the Israelites greatest victory when they entered the land, the city that was on the border between Israel and Judea. Prophets also come out from Jericho and Elisha tells them he knows, and "to be silent." Next, it is on to the Jordan River. It is the boundary between Israel and Transjordan. Once they cross the Jordan they are no longer in Israel, they will be beyond the boundary out into the unknown.

Elijah takes his prophets mantle and rolls it up and like Moses before him strike's the water and the river is divided and they can walk across on dry land.

When they crossed over Elijah realized his time on earth was drawing to an end. He asked his friend, "What might I do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha has a ready answer, "Please let me inherit a double portion of your spirit." He was asking something that Elijah could not deliver. He was asking for a double portion of his spirit. It is a gift that only God can give.

One does not inherit the Spirit of the Lord neither is it passed on from generation to generation. Some think just because their parents or grandparents were spiritual that counts for them and they don't have to work as hard at their faith. I remember seeing a photo in a magazine of a pair of eye glasses sitting beside an open Bible. The short story was that the young man's grandmother was a devout person of faith and was always quoting from or reading from the Bible to help with life problems. When grandma died all he had was her Bible and her glasses. He had tried reading the Bible on his own but he didn't see what she saw. So one day he put on her glasses hoping that looking through grandma's glasses he would see what she saw. It was only then that he realized that each person has to develop their own faith it is not something passed down from generation to generation like an heirloom.

Elisha wanted a double portion of Elijah's spirit. This event is happening within a precious thing called time. Within the framework of time ... 24 hours in a day ... sixty minutes in an hour ... sixty seconds within a minute. Tick tock the clock says. What will happen in the next few moments with Elijah and Elisha? Augustine, the fourth century theologian wrote, "We are forced to act within a tiny window of time—the present—since the past is unrecoverable and the future is not yet available."

We are between what was and what will be. And in this tiny window we are faced with the here and now. Elijah is on the way out (past)—he and Elisha are walking in the present moment—we don't yet know if Elisha will be the inheritor of the spirit of Elijah. How many times are you and I caught in this tiny window of time?

Maybe it is something as mundane as grocery shopping. You know what you have eaten for the last two weeks but the future is wide open. In this tiny window of the present you will decide by what you buy what the future will look like. Maybe it is something more serious like waiting for an acceptance letter to college or grad school, you have prepared the best you could but you do not know what the future holds, the future is not available to you. Or, you have met someone who you think would make a wonderful life partner but what do they think? Between the past events and the present asking of the question remains an unavailable future. Or, you are pondering end of life issues. You may look back on a grand past with all of your accomplishments but in this tiny window of time, it could be hours, days, weeks, months, but you have to decide on a future that is not yet available to us.

Elijah and Elisha along with us are in the moment ... they knew what Elijah had meant to God's people in the past ... but there was no guarantee that God was going to follow the same path in the unattached future. "They both could see the end of one path and could not see the beginning of another."

What do you do when you are caught like this between two times? When you are caught in one of life's really big moments between the past that you know and the future that you only dream about. Elisha was told there would be a sign; if he saw Elijah taken up to heaven, then he would receive the double portion of the Spirit. What would that sign look like? What was he looking for? And in that moment when he saw the fiery chariot and the horses winging their way from the clouds he was both overjoyed and heartbroken—overjoyed that he was to receive his wish; heartbroken because his mentor was being taken away from him.

When the chariot wings its way into our lives how will we react? When we see Jesus on the mountain top calling us to a new life that is beyond the possibilities of what we ever thought possible calling us into an unnamed unknown place ... in that tiny moment of time between what has been and the future not yet available ... in that moment what will we hear and see? Jesus heard the voice of God and Elisha saw a chariot of fire:

Swing low; sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home

I looked over Jordan and what did I see coming for to carry me home

a band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.

The brightest day that ever I saw, coming for to carry me home,
When Jesus washed my sins away, coming for to carry me home.