

Prophets Series #3  
2 Kings 2:1-12

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### Elijah, Elisha, & the Whirlwind

*At the end of his life, Elijah designates Elisha to carry on his ministry by giving him his robe, which was known as a mantle.*

*Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."*

*Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."*

*Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.*

*When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "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." 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 into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.*

*He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.*

In his book *Where is God when It Hurts?*, Philip Yancey describes an interesting funeral tradition in the Black Muslim community. When the body is laid out, close friends and family encircle the casket and stand quietly, looking at the dead person. There are no tears, no flowers, no singing. Muslim sisters pass around small trays from which everyone takes a thin, round peppermint candy. At a given signal the onlookers place the candies into their mouths, and as the mints slowly melt the funeral-goers reflect on the sweetness of the life they are commemorating. Grief is not just about sadness; it is also about joy. (Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, p. 246)

When I read our Old Testament lesson for today - part history, part legend, part theology - I am struck by the unwillingness of Elisha to leave his mentor. Elijah, the great prophet, is about to die, to leave his young disciple. That is clear from the very first verse. It's not a matter of if. It's only a matter of when. Death, separation, and transition are imminent and Elisha has a choice -- a choice about how he will respond, how he will grieve. Whether he likes it or not, his life is about to change.

And so it is with us. When change, transition, or death occur in our lives, more often than not we cannot avoid it. Someone we love and depend upon gets sick -- so sick that they cannot get better. Our own bodies betray us -- either because we are getting older or because disease has struck. A marriage that seemed so easy and simple all of a sudden becomes difficult and strained -- and love will never be the same. Sons and daughters cease to be children and become adults, and their relationships with their parents change. The world changes. The privileges we took for granted are threatened by what we perceive to be too many people with too many needs. Our faith changes. That lovable old God that many of us imagined as children becomes a distant enigma -- no longer feeding us the pablum of security, but instead challenging us with the solid food of choice and commitment.

Transition, change, and death are inevitable, and today Elisha gives us some lessons about how to cope, how to survive, in these difficult moments of our living.

First, notice that Elisha walks toward the pain, not away from it. He chooses to embrace every moment of time before Elijah goes away. Rather than avoiding the grief, the fear, the unknown, Elisha lives fully in the moment -- willing to trust and accept whatever comes his way. Elijah tells him to stay behind, but Elisha insists on accompanying Elijah. Two times others tell him, "The Lord will take your master away from you today." Each time Elisha says, "Yes, I know. Be silent. I'm going with him." This young prophet decides that it is better to embrace the pain, up close and in touch with his friend -- than to avoid the pain at a distance, and be all alone. Anticipating and planning for change and transition -- this seems to be the life-affirming way Elisha models for us to embrace the traumas and tragedies of our living. But how hard this is to do! Does pain really need to be a part of life, of growth, of death?

C. S. Lewis, one of the great Christian writers of the 20th century, married late in life - experiencing an exquisite relationship of passion and joy. His marriage was beautifully captured a few years ago in the film *Shadowlands*. Yet after only four brief years of bliss, his wife died of cancer. Trying to make sense of her death, Lewis wrote a poignant book about grief called *A Grief Observed*. In that book he has this to say about God and the pain of grief: "But suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless. But is it credible that such extremities of [pain] should be necessary for us? Well, take your choice. The [pain] occurs. If it is unnecessary, then there is no God - or a bad one. If there is a good God, then this [pain] is necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit it if it wasn't." (p. 50).

To walk toward the pain, to embrace the transition -- whether we are talking about change in a relationship, the death of a loved one, or the fading of our own physical strength -- Elisha seems to be telling us that there is joy and promise and meaning in the pain. There is purpose---bigger than the pain---that can give ultimate meaning to our lives. But this is not all he teaches us.

The other decision that Elisha makes -- that Elijah encourages Elisha to make -- is to rehearse and celebrate the past. As they walk toward the pain of separation and change, these two men travel through the landscape of their history, rehearsing all the gifts and blessings of the Promised Land, all the ways that God has led and blessed and shaped them through the ups and downs of their past. Gilgal and Bethel, Jericho and Jordan -- these place names may mean nothing to us, but they are very important to understanding this text. This is not like saying as you go towards Cokato on Highway 12, you go through Delano, Montrose, Waverly, and Howard Lake. The places to which Elijah and Elisha go would for Americans be like going to Lexington & Concord, Gettysburg, Selma, and Dallas -- places that were the site of significant, transformative events in our history. 300 or so years before Elijah and Elisha, when the people of Israel entered the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership, these locations of Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, and Jordan were the site of important events: moments of release and liberation, moments of salvation and victory, moments in the past of transition and risk when the LORD God had provided for them. By rehearsing these faithful events of the past, Elisha is fortified to trust the faithfulness of the future -- to believe that as he walks toward the pain, he will be brought through this transition, too, into a future of hope and promise.

About 25 years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In it he writes: "In the Jewish tradition, the special prayer known as the Mourner's Kaddish is not about death, but about life, and it praises God for having created a basically good and livable world. By reciting that prayer, the mourner is reminded of all that is good and worth living for. There is a crucial difference between denying the tragedy, insisting that everything is for the best, and seeing the tragedy in the context of a whole life, keeping one's eye and mind on what has enriched you, and not only on what you have lost." (p. 139).

In this whole strange and mysterious story about Elijah and Elisha and the whirlwind, not once do we find the young Elisha wondering about God. Not once do we find him in despair and fear asking: "Where is God in the midst of this death, this pain, this transition?" But isn't this the question we often ask? C. S. Lewis, in the same book I mentioned earlier, writes of his own experience with God during and after the death of his wife: "Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing God... if you remember yourself and turn to God with gratitude and praise, you will be - or so it feels- welcomed with open arms. But go to God when your need is desperate, when all other help

is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.... There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house.... What can this mean? Why is God so present...in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble? (*A Grief Observed*, pp. 4-5) That was how Lewis felt in the depths of his grief.

It is interesting to note that the only time the lectionary calls for us to read this story of Elijah and Elisha is on Transfiguration Sunday, when the Gospel reading is the rather odd tale from Mark about Jesus' vision on a mountain top -- with voices and clouds and Moses and Elijah having a conversation with Jesus. The event takes place at the midpoint of Mark's gospel -- between the time when Jesus predicts his suffering and death and the time when the actual suffering and death take place. What the glowing garments and the testimonies of Elijah and Moses mean for Mark is that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the Holy One of Israel for whom the people have been waiting to free them and heal them and make them safe. And the cloud? In the Old Testament clouds are often a sign of God's presence and here the cloud underlines this special identity of Jesus.

But wait a minute. A messiah who suffers? A God who works through pain, instead of eradicating pain? A God who pushes us into loss and death and transition -- instead of protecting us from them? This is not what the disciples -- and not what we ourselves -- have bargained for. And yet, my friends, that is what the cross means and what Jesus is all about. Every once in awhile I get asked why our processional cross has the corpus, the body of Christ, on it. Why not have an empty cross to indicate that Christ is risen? For me, it is important to be constantly reminded what God in Jesus experienced on the cross, embracing the pain of human suffering and grief and transforming it into life. The cross reminds us that God is the one to trust in the transitions -- the one who remains faithful in the change -- the one who feels the pain, endures the pain, and carries us through to the fullness of life beyond the pain. That is the Christian message. We cannot live it any other way.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples that first Easter morning, resurrected beyond his pain, do you remember how it was that they recognized him? It was the scars of his adversity that he showed them. When Elisha turned away from his vigil with Elijah's death, he ripped his clothes in grief. But he went away filled with a double portion of God's Spirit that had filled Elijah - filled with new boldness for ministry. When Jesus left the Mount of Transfiguration having seen God face to face, it was not a life of leisure that he and his disciples were given, but an arduous journey up another mountain called Golgotha.

It is understandable that we want to avoid the difficult transitions that life inevitably brings to us. But when those transitions come, we can trust that it is here and primarily here - in the shadows of death and change - that we find the fullness and wholeness of life. We are called to be trusting precisely in the transitions of our living, to let go and let God.

This is the Good News of the Christian faith. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*I am indebted to Susan R. Andrews, Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, MD for some of the key points of this sermon.*