

Until the Very End

II Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9 February 22, 2009

Elijah and Elisha were prophets. Elijah was an aging one. Elisha was an up and coming one. Elijah was nearing the end of a highly successful run as king of the prophets. Elisha was his student and helper. The story we heard revolves around several conversations the two of them had as Elijah was on his way to his death.

As the two of them were leaving the little community of Gilgal, Elijah encouraged Elisha to stay put - to not continue the journey with him.

Elisha's response to Elijah's suggestion was swift. He would have nothing to do with letting his friend and mentor go it alone. And so, seemingly without any attempt on Elijah's part to further encourage the young Elisha, the two of them proceed toward Bethel. Now, Bethel, Gilgal and the later Jericho are significant because they were centers of prophetic communities. And some of the young prophets in the Bethel Seminary, perhaps wishing to gain brownie points with the local prophetic leaders, question Elisha: "Hey, Little E, don't you know the condition of Big E? The Lord's going to call him home today."

We're not really sure what their intent was by their line of questioning. But there's no doubt what Elisha thought of their line of questioning: "I know, I know. Now, be quiet. What's wrong with you guys? This is my friend, my teacher. Now's not a time I can leave him alone."

And Elijah, perhaps sensing the young prophets deeper motivation and feelings again offers Elisha the opportunity to stay put. Elisha again refuses. And again, seemingly no fight from Elijah and the two prophets move on to Jericho.

There, they encounter members of the Jericho prophetic society and they attempt also to dissuade Elisha from this seemingly insane choice to accompany his friend to his death.

And Elisha's response is again prompt and firm.

And on the story goes with Elijah continuing to give Elisha chances to leave and Elisha remaining faithful - and not just with his words, but by his actions - his willingness to be present. Elisha's love and respect for Elijah enables him to ignore the potential suffering that his friend might have to endure and that he himself might have to undergo as a result of his being present during the last moments. That's the way it is with love though - it's sacrificial - it's loyal - it's until the very end.

The portion of the story with which we are dealing this morning ends with Elijah dieing - departing from his young friend. The description of which causes us to be aware that Elisha was pretty moved by the experience as he referenced a chariot of fire and horses of fire and a whirlwind. Just before this remarkable scene Elijah parts the waters of the Jordan by striking the river water with his rolled up mantle. The fifty prophets from Jericho that followed them to the Jordan were some distance away when the two of them crossed thru on the river bottom but there is no doubt they saw what was happened. The little repeat of Exodus history would not have been lost on them. They knew they were about to witness something monumental. When the two of them arrived on the other side of the Jordan, Elijah said to Elisha, "OK, tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you."

And Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

We have to understand that what Elisha was asking for was not to be twice as powerful as Elijah. His request relates to a custom noted in Deuteronomy (21:17) which references that the firstborn son was entitled to a double share of the father's estate, while the younger sons would get only a single share. Elisha was requesting that he be designated the rightful heir of Elijah - that there be some recognition to the various schools of prophecy that he would now be the "lead prophet."¹

Elijah warned his understudy that would be a very difficult request to grant. But, he told him that if he truly was able to watch him be taken up that would be a sign that God had granted Elisha's request. And then comes the amazing scene of the chariot and fire and whirlwind thus acknowledging Elisha's witnessing of Elijah's departing.

And the story goes on in the portion after that which we read this morning to describe Elijah's mantle falling to the ground as he is whisked away and Elisha picking up the mantle - the cloak-like piece of material - of his master and using it to again part the waters of the Jordan while offering this invocation: "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" The very parting of the waters implies the answer: "God is still with us. God has not abandoned us. God is now with Elisha as he was with Elijah." Elisha picked up the mantle of the prophetic office and turned the word of God loose on another generation."²

But, I want to back up - the portion of the story I want us to focus on is the tenacity - the loyalty - the love - that enabled Elisha to stay with his friend until the very end.

A few weeks ago it became apparent that one of our members was not going to make it. The doctors advised that it was time to let her go. And so the decision was made to no longer make her stay alive aided by medical technology. The two dear friends who were granted the power to make this decision on her behalf because she had no family around, decided that they would be with her and they let us know we were welcome to be present if we wanted to be. We passed the word to a few folks who had worked closely with her in the life of the church. There were about twelve of us who gathered in her room in St. Ann's ICU two weeks ago tonight. There was some singing of hymns and some praying and some comforting words by friends offered. Most of all there was community - there was a witness of what faith and love enables persons to do in the face of adversity - there was a determination to be with her in her final hours. Several times the chaplain on duty whispered to me, "Wow! What a faith community your church is." All I could do was nod because there was something in my throat. It was a pretty incredible time - a very sad scene was transfigured because we were there with one another and with her until the very end. There's no way to know if she knew we were there but I believe she did and I believe it made a difference. Oh, there was no visible chariot of fire or whirlwind but I know I witnessed something that was akin to what Elisha experienced when his friend departed.

It was one of those moments when you knew God was present - one of those mountaintop moments that cause us to be tempted like the disciples to make out of it a permanent reality.

Some of you have heard me reference before that I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. my freshman year at ONU. It was just three months before his assassination. Whenever I read the story of the Transfiguration I can't help but recall the speech he gave the night before his assassination. His concluding remarks included these powerful and prophetic words: "I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a

people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."³

Mountain top experiences will do that to you. They'll change you - they'll change your perspective on things - they'll enable you to do things you never thought possible to do - that you never even considered doing before the mountain top experience did it's thing to you - did it's thing inside you.

Actually, for me a sort of transfiguring experience took place when I heard King that day at Northern. He said things that touched areas of my soul I didn't know needed touched. He said things that contributed to my beginning to examine what I believed instead of accepting everything anyone told me I should believe about what it meant to follow Jesus.

Peter, James and John were up on a mountain with Jesus and they had this awesome experience. They "saw Jesus in an entirely new way" is the way one bible scholar interpreted the experience.⁴ She continued, "It is not so much that Jesus changes before their eyes, but rather that their eyes are suddenly open to the glory that has always been present in Jesus."⁵

The author of Mark claims that Peter and the others didn't know what to say because they were terrified by what they were seeing: Jesus in whiter clothes than any earthly bleach could make them - two of the greatest personalities of the faith, Elijah and Moses, talking with Jesus - a cloud and a voice. So much that fairly shouted: "This is the Messiah you've been waiting for!"

Despite his not knowing what to say, Peter spoke. He spoke words similar to ones many of us have spoken over the years when we've had experiences that have deeply moved us - those experiences when we've sensed everything was OK in the world and we didn't want the experience to end - when we didn't want to go home - when we understood ourselves differently - when we had a new perspective on ourselves, the world, God, others, our faith - moments when everything just sort of came together - moments when what was troubling us seemed to clear up. Perhaps it was a church camp experience - a Cum Christo, Emmaus, or Marriage Enrichment weekend - an Easter Sunday morning worship experience - a Christmas Eve candlelight service - a birth - a wonder of nature.

The times in my life that come to my mind when I start to think of transforming experiences include times like an evening devotion on the hillside at Camp Wesley, my wedding day, the births of my children, a deepening religious experience at Lakeside, the times I have climbed to the top of the Chimneys in the Smokies, mission trips to New Orleans and South Dakota, when viewing the Grand Canyon and the Badlands.

And Peter said: "Let's make some shelter houses for the three of you. Let's stay here and maybe invite others to come and see you here. They'll believe - they'll follow you - if they see you here, like this, Lord."

Oh, how often that is what we are tempted to do with religious experiences. Instead of making foundations out of them, we start to worship them and often our faith development stalls as a result. You see, the problem with trying to hang on to good religious experiences is that we won't grow much if we do. There is no question it's tempting to make the church a place where we are safe from the trauma going on in the world - the storms of life. But that's not the way it's supposed to be. We're not supposed to hole up in the church. We come here to get our spiritual batteries recharged for the purpose of going back into the world.

Jesus' reaction to Peter's idea? While the Markan text doesn't really offer any words of explanation it is pretty clear that the shrine building proposed by Peter didn't happen. The text we read this morning simply reports

that they went down the mountain with Jesus telling them to keep quiet about what they had experienced.

I think the most significant part of the story is what happened after the transfiguration - after Peter's offer to build three cabins - after God spoke to Jesus - after they went down from the mountain - when they arrived in the valley. Instead of peace and harmony Jesus found his disciples squabbling with the teachers of the law, apparently about the difficulty they were having healing someone. It was a depressing scene down in the valley compared to the scene up on the mountain and I would offer you this morning that the purpose of mountaintop experiences is to prepare us for life in the valleys of everyday life. Let me put it another way: mountaintop experiences are useless unless they result in making a difference in how we live the rest of our lives - in the valleys that are our lives.

One preacher ended a sermon of his on the Transfiguration by noting: "Peter never built his shrines, Moses and Elijah went back to heaven. And Jesus? Jesus went back to where the people were, back to the valley to preach, to teach, to heal, and eventually, to travel to the cross for you and for me."⁶

Transfiguring - transforming - experiences happen to us so that our resolve might be strengthened to the point that we are able to hang in there until the very end and not fall victim to the desire to normalize the life-changing opportunities that come our way. It's about being a follower of Jesus until the very end.

Let us pray.

1. Curtis Lewis, "Going, Going, Gone," Old Testament Sermons for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 0-7880-1899-XA.
2. Ibid.
3. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speech
4. Faye Neff, "The Unveiling," The Clergy Journal, May/June, 2005, p. 92.
5. Ibid.
6. David E. Leininger, "From Mountain to Mission," Collected Sermons, *ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.*, 2005, 0-000-0000-16.