

7-12-2020 SERMON CCI 2 Kings 2: 1-15 A Double Portion

Today we take our last look at the life of the prophet Elijah. Elijah's ministry as God's prophet was coming to an end and God had given Elijah a new job- of mentoring the one who would carry on after him- a young man named Elisha. Elijah found Elisha plowing in his father's field. There in his father's field, it wasn't obvious that Elisha had the attributes to become a powerful prophet of God. You know, those attributes a church looks for in a new pastor- here's one job description I read: *Must be 29 years old, with 40 years of pastoral experience, has a heart for young people, but visits 15 older adults each week and is still in the office for whenever we call, preaches exactly 10 minutes without ever offending anyone, is good looking.* Churches tend to look on the outside of candidates, but God saw Elisha's heart, and Elijah threw his prophet's mantle—something like a cape—over Elisha to anoint him as the new prophet. Then Elijah began to teach Elisha all he knew about being a faithful prophet. Perhaps some of what we've learned the last few weeks- those lessons about faith we learn beside a dry brook, how God had provided his needs miraculously at a poor starving widow's house, how God loves all people, when God sent fire from heaven on Mount Carmel to prove God alone is God. And then his depression after that event, how God gave him the job of preparing Elisha to take his place, how important it is to know when to let go and let God do something new.

In today's scripture reading, Elijah knew his time of ministry was coming to an end. So he traveled to two different places to say his good-byes to the communities of prophets who were still faithful to God- the ones Elijah didn't remember when he was in his depression. Each community was located in a historic place in Jewish history- Jericho where God had fought his people's first battle in the Promised Land; and Bethel, where Jacob had met with God. And each time, Elisha demanded to go with him. It seems Elisha wasn't ready to let Elijah go quite yet. Maybe he felt he needed to learn more; perhaps he was nervous about

double share was not arrogant. He wasn't asking to be twice as good a prophet as Elijah. He was merely asking for what every firstborn son received from their father- a double portion of the inheritance. He was inheriting Elijah's role; he needed Elijah's power. So he asked for a double share of God's Spirit.

But in the end, no matter how long Elijah and Elisha stalled, God's fiery chariot and horses swept in and separated the two men. I've always had the image of Elijah riding up to heaven in God's fiery chariot; almost all the artwork of this story shows Elijah riding in a chariot. But if we look closely at verse 11, Elijah rode up in a whirlwind. God sent the chariot to help Elijah and Elisha finally part. I imagine it setting down between them and slowly edging them farther and farther apart. And then as Elijah disappeared into the sky, his prophet's mantle fluttered to the ground. **And he was gone.** Elisha had a choice to make: will he pick up the mantle and carry on or keep wishing for what he used to have? Elisha picked up the mantle. It was time to do what Elijah had prepared him to do. Cross back over the Jordan River to be God's prophet. Just like Elijah had done, Elisha struck the water with the mantle, and he cried out, "Where is the Lord now?" It's a question we may ask when the change we face feels unclear and more than we can bear. But as the water parted for Elisha, he understood that Elijah may have been gone, but God hadn't gone anywhere. God was still with him in power. It's a truth we need to hear in the changes we face today too. Knowing that God is with us gives us the courage to let go and grab hold of God into the unknown future.

We will soon vacate this space that has been the faith home for this congregation for about 7 years. The sorting and packing is in full swing, the movers are coming this Tuesday to give us an estimate of the moving costs and set a moving date, the storage unit is reserved. The actual move is just a list of details to get done; the impact of this move on our hearts is harder. Expect some grief as we leave this space. In my work as chaplain I learned that much of the journey of grief after the loss of a person we love is moving from a relationship with that person to a

taking his place as God's prophet. Whatever the reason, it can be hard to let go of someone we have counted on to help us through difficult times and teach us God's ways.

And if that wasn't hard enough, each place they went, the prophets seemed to taunt him, "Do you know that today the LORD is going to take your master from you?" Not, "Elijah will leave today, how can we support you as he leaves?" They focused on what Elisha was about to lose. And Elisha responded like we often do when we don't want to face a truth that's obvious to everyone else: "Shut up. I don't want to talk about it." Sometimes we just can't face the thought of losing something or someone who's been important, and we make decisions to protect what we've had rather than consider what God has for us now.

When Elijah's time to depart had finally come, he walked with Elisha to the Jordan River, that special place where God's people had crossed over into the Promised Land after they escaped from Egypt. And as Elijah rolled up his mantle and hit the water with it, the waters parted just like they had for God's people so many years before. Elijah and Elisha walked across on dry land. And there on the other side of the river, Elijah and Elisha said their last words to one another.

Last words are hard, aren't they? How do we put into words what someone has meant to us? What memories are important to share? What last words of encouragement? Sometimes the feelings are so strong, we're at a loss for words. If we hug, we don't want to stop. Life might stop if we stop. One of the saddest parts of the coronavirus for me is that those who die from the virus don't have the privilege of their families being present and sharing last words. Last words count. I will remember forever our son's last words to me on the phone 5 days before he died unexpectedly. "Love you too, Mom." Last words are words we treasure for the rest of our lives.

We only know one portion of their last words that day. Elijah asked what was one last thing he could do for Elisha. Of all the things Elisha could ask for, he asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit. Asking for a

relationship with their memory. Saying good-bye to what you have enjoyed in this space, letting what was familiar and precious become memory, is part of our spiritual journey going forward.

This I believe, wholeheartedly: Although saying goodbye to what we know is hard, it can be done with great hope. Elijah departed, and his particular time and kind of ministry came to an end. But God didn't depart. Ministry continued in a new form with Elisha, and the stories of the past became an encouragement for God's new story of the future. It's been God's way throughout history. God has never settled for repeating the past; God is always doing something new.

So friends, let's not be afraid to let tears come as we say good-bye to this sacred space. Sadness is a normal part of saying good-bye. But let us not let our sadness guide the future. Let God's Spirit guide us into a new future. Elisha asked for a double portion of God's Spirit as he entered his unknown future. What better gift can we ask from God than a double share of God's Spirit for us?