

February 14 2021 [St. Andrew's]

2 Kings 2:1-12

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel."

But Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho."

And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho.

The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan."

And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on.

Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

Mark 9:2-9

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Sermon: "Loss and Gain"

When I first read through our Scripture readings for today,
I confess: I had to try not to skim;
they are both very familiar stories to me,
as they may be to some of you.

Elijah being taken up into heaven by a whirlwind,

the appearance of chariots of fire...
 ...it's an Old Testament lesson Sunday school favourite!
 And we honour Christ's transfiguration most years,
 because it's marked out as a special Sunday
 on our church calendars.

But I did not skim; I read them closely!
 Because the action of these stories,
 the big "oh wow, glory to God" moments
 were so familiar to me,
 I was caught by what was happening
 with the people
 other than Elijah and Jesus,
 what they were experiencing
 as these incredible events
 unfolded around them.

With Elisha and for Peter, James and John...
 we'd expect some oh wow-ing and some praising to be happening...
 but that's not what happens at all.
 Peter, James and John were afraid
 and not sure what to do.
 Elisha bore the terrible burden for days
 of knowing that Elijah
 was about to be taken from him,
 and seeing his mentor
 and father-figure
 whirled up into heaven, taken from Elisha's life, inspired mourning and grieving,
 not praise and wonder.

There's a dissonance between what is happening
 in these two passages of Scripture
 and how the people standing witness
 respond.

In these big, glory-to-God moments,
 where Christ's divine nature and his place in salvation history
 are made visible,
 where God's great prophet is taken up into heaven
 without having to suffer death,
 amidst a spectacular display of God's power...
 ...we love these stories because of what they proclaim about God and Jesus,
 about God's great plan and saving work in the world.
 But the people who were right there,
 seeing and experiencing,
 were afraid, full of uncertainty and full of grief.
 How can these incredible moments inspire
 such a deep sense of loss and fear

in the people who were right there,
witnessing them?

Let's dig a little deeper and see what we can see.

Last week, we reflected on Elijah in the earlier days of his prophetic ministry.
In the intervening years between last week and this week,
Elijah has done some incredible things,
including a major showdown between Elijah and God
and the priests of Baal.
Obviously, God and Elijah won that confrontation!

Later, Elijah picked up an apprentice,
a trainee-prophet, named Elisha,
and the two had been companions ever since;
it is clear that Elisha loves Elijah like a father.

In these final days of Elijah's life on earth,
Elisha holds on tight,
clinging to Elijah and to every precious moment that is left to them.
Other prophets try to tell Elisha that Elijah will be gone soon;
"Yes, I know," [Elisha] replies, "so be quiet."
There is a lot of pain in that reply,
a kind of pain familiar to some of us.
But there is also an awful lot of love.

Elijah and Elisha cross over the Jordan river together,
and walk and talk alone together,
one last time.

Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit,
which is as much about prophetic power
as it is asking to be recognised as Elijah's firstborn
and most beloved son and heir.

And then, as expected and yet, all of a sudden,
God's power tears across the sky as a chariot of fire sweeps down
to divide them,
and Elijah is lifted up into heaven.
Elisha has seen it;
he will become the prophet Elijah
has trained him to be,
that God has called him to become.
But Elisha grieves his loss.
Peter and James and John are afraid,
because something wild and inexplicable is happening in front of them.
They are also afraid because Jesus has been telling them
that he is going to die soon,
that some of them would "not taste death
before they see that the kingdom of God

has come with power.”

For all the disciples knew,
 what they were seeing was the kingdom of God,
 coming with power...
 ...maybe they were *all* about to die, not just Jesus.
 Whatever was happening, it seems
 they recognised it as significant,
 connecting it to everything
 Jesus had been saying
 about the Son of Man
 suffering and dying.

And Peter – bold, decisive, occasionally wrong-headed Peter –
 didn’t know what to do, because this was too much,
 and he – all three of them – were afraid.

Both of these stories are centered
 on these big moments of change,
 turning points,
 as Elijah was taken up and Elisha become prophet,
 as Jesus revealed more of who he was
 and the disciples understood the divine power
 at work in their world
 through their teacher and friend.
 Viewing these moments solely as turning points
 would be easier, less emotionally-charged;
 we could celebrate them as big, glory-to-God moments,
 honour the power and saving love displayed through them,
 find our good news today in that power and that love.

But where does that leave Elisha and the disciples, their loss and fear?
 Where does that leave us,
 when loss and fear eclipse God’s power and love in our lives?

There is a brilliant and subtle hint for us,
 right at the beginning of both of our passages today;
 clues about how to understand what’s happening in each story:
 “when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven
 in a whirlwind” in 2 Kings
 and “after six days” in Mark 9.

The hint is that everything that follows is part of a larger story,
 and that everything must be read in light of
 the end of the story,
 and the ending is not quite
 where Elisha and the disciples
 – where we –
 think it is.

After Elijah is taken up,
held secure and safely delivered into the keeping of his God,
Elisha tears his garment and mourns the loss.
But this is not the end of the story.

He picks up his torn garment,
the mantle that had first been thrown upon him by Elijah.
He strikes the water of the Jordan,
just like Elijah, and he parted it.

Like Jesus and his disciples coming down the mountain,
Elisha leaves behind this rarefied place
and re-enters the land of God's people.
I doubt very much that gaining Elijah's power
in any way compensated for this loss,
not if Elisha's grief was genuine.

Yet, the end of the story is not a grieving, broken Elisha;
it's an Elisha who has stopped trying to keep Elijah,
recognising that his task was not to hold on
– to Elijah, to grief, to loss –
but to carry on, instead.

If we were to follow his career as prophet,
we would see that Elisha carries out his prophetic task
for some sixty years in a time of conflict,
and that he does so with incredible power
to heal and to rescue and to teach.

The good news for Elisha is that God was with him;
helping him to carry on the work of his mentor and father-figure,
and helping him find his feet again on his own,
helping him become who God needed him to be.

Six days ago, Jesus told his disciples some things
that frightened and confused them rather badly.
He told them the end of the story.

Jesus spoke plainly, telling his disciples that he would be rejected
by everyone with power and position in their society:
elders, chief priests and rabbis.
Jesus told them he would be – must be –
killed and after three days, rise again.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me, said Jesus.
For whoever wants to save their life will lose it,

but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel
will save it.

The disciples did not like this, and they did not understand;
Peter even went so far as to take Jesus aside
and rebuke Jesus for speaking like this.

For the past six days,
Jesus' painful and disturbing words had been ringing in their ears
and taking root in their hearts:
that Jesus, their teacher and friend, their Messiah,
must suffer and die,
that he will rise from that death,
and that they, as his followers,
must walk a similar path.
And it's no easy path.

The path Jesus walks, the path his disciples would walk,
is a path where victory looks like defeat,
where the gains of healing and restoration
look like painful losses,
and where life looks like death.

Seeing Jesus lit up on that mountain-top,
flanked by Moses and Elijah,
the fear and uncertainty the disciples felt,
was not the end of the story.

As they left the rarefied air of the mountain's peak,
descending back into the world,
Jesus carried on with his ministry
and the disciples carried on following him.
But looming now on the horizon is the end of the story:
death, but also life.
And life,
not just for Jesus
come Easter morning,
but for us all
and for all creation.

The good news for us in these stories,
when we are burdened by our own loss,
whatever or whomever that loss might be,
the good news
is that it's not the end of the story.

And if we extend our gaze,
lift up our heads and maybe strain our eyes,

we will, with God's loving help,
see beyond the loss and fear of the moment
and catch a glimpse of that ending.

We look ahead,
and we glimpse healing and restored purpose,
found in becoming the people God created us and calls us to be.

We look ahead,
and we glimpse God's saving plan unfolding
in big, sweeping glory-to-God moments,
but also in small gentle movements
in the lives of those we love
and in our hearts and minds, too.

We look ahead,
and we glimpse the kingdom of God,
coming in power, just like Jesus promised,
and we glimpse the wholeness and communion
we will all share together as one in Christ
in that kingdom.

We look ahead,
and we glimpse light on the other side of the darkness
that seems to stretch out in front of us,
light that no loss or fear can ever truly eclipse,
light that God in Christ keeps pouring
into our broken world and our weary hearts.

Elisha, picking up his torn garment,
walking back across the Jordan River;
the disciples, following Jesus down the mountain
and all the way to the Cross.
The only thing they didn't do was stand still,
mired and stuck in loss, uncertainty and fear.

We are all of us burdened these days in some way, to some degree,
by loss, by uncertainty,
by fear, by anxieties and worries,
by trouble too big for us to understand,
by situations in which we feel so helpless;

no one really wants to stay
in those thoughts and feelings,
and yet it is so easy
to become stuck in them,
with no will or capacity on our own
to stop holding on
and start carrying on.

Taking those first steps, deciding to carry on,
for Elisha, for the disciples, for us;
it's an act of deeply-trusting faith,
inspired by love and impelled by hope.

And it all rests on the promises of God,
promises that accompany us every step of the way,
promises that make the end of the story
a place of abundant gain,
to counter-balance all that loss:
a place of healing, of wholeness
and new abundant life, now and forever.
Thanks be to God!
Amen.