

Transitions and Transfiguration

II Kings 2:1-14

Mark 9:2-9

“Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’”

Transitions were on the near horizon for Elisha and the disciples in these two stories. Elisha’s master was about to be taken up to heaven by a whirlwind and the disciples’ Messiah was about to be crucified. What in the details of these stories readied those left behind for the next chapter of their lives? What in these stories readies us for the next chapter in our life together?

Just after Elijah hears the voice of God, not in the wind or earthquake or fire but after the sound of sheer silence, sending him back into the fray, Elijah passes by Elisha as he is plowing a field. Elijah throws his mantle, his prophetic authority over Elisha, prompting Elisha to run after Elijah saying, “Let me kiss my father and mother, and then I will follow you.” “Forget it,” Elijah says, anticipating Jesus’ words, but then Elisha leaves everything to serve Elijah.

For four chapters, Elisha watches wide-eyed as Elijah goes up against kings and speaks truth to power. Then at the beginning of the fifth chapter we read, “Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind. . . .” Given his sense of an ending, Elijah’s instinct is to distance himself from his disciple, three times telling him to stay behind. The Bible does not say why. Was this prophet, who once had gone a day’s journey into the wilderness to sit under a solitary broom tree and ask God to take his life, was he wanting to die alone? Or was his last act as a master to give Elisha the time and the space to let go, to quit his dependence on the master for Elisha’s sake?

But it is Elisha’s faithful response that first tutors us about endings. Notice that he does not let his master create distance between them so that the parting will be easier. As he has followed Elijah in life, so he will accompany him to the end, trusting that the end will be as destiny-clinging as the beginning. I have known people who, when it is time to leave or be left, get angry. It is a great way to distance yourself emotionally, to keep yourself from the tender pain of parting. I have also known people who wish the time away, who focus on the second chapter before the first is over. As long as Elijah lives, Elisha continues to follow his master. The places where they stop—Bethel, Jericho, the banks of the Jordan River—will all prove significant for Elisha’s destiny. What strikes me about Elisha is that he simply keeps on keeping on, he does not stop but continues to move forward, he is fully present and available.

Next, Elisha silences the self-appointed transition experts whose words miss the depths that are being sounded in Elisha as he faces Elijah’s departure. I think the writer uses the company of prophets to let us know that Elisha’s insistence on following Elijah to the end is not a denial but an acceptance of what is about to change in his life. As though it were new information, the prophets ask Elisha if he knows Elijah is leaving. “Yes, I know,” he snaps. What he knows, because he has watched Elijah, is that God is involved in what is about to happen. Elijah’s departure is not information to Elisha but an anticipated revelation, an epiphany of God’s coming near. The proper response is silence, is listening, is single-minded anticipation.

Finally, the two prophets come to the Jordan. Again Elijah counsels Elisha to stay and for the last time Elisha refuses to leave his master. Then like Moses, Elijah strikes the water with his mantle, his prophetic authority, and it parts. The two cross over alone on dry ground. It is the place where Israel first entered the land God had promised. It is the place where Jesus will be baptized by John. It is a thin place where God’s Spirit comes near. At the end, Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah’s spirit, asks to be more than his master’s disciple, asks for the inheritance that belongs to the first-born son. True to the witness of his entire life, Elijah tells Elisha to keep his eye on him to the very end, knowing Elisha will see God. Elisha cries “Father, father!” as he watches Elijah ascend, suggesting in his steady gaze that the double portion has been granted. Then, after a gesture of grief, Elisha picks up Elijah’s mantle, strikes the water and begins to prophesy.

You and I are not Elijah or Elisha by a long shot, but we begin a time of transition today in our relationship with one another and our relationship with the master whose disciples we are. In the two years that I imagine we yet will be given together, we would do well to remember these two prophets of Israel and their last day together. They resisted the instinct to distance themselves from one another by absence or anger and so from the hard lessons that parting has to give; they kept on keeping on, continuing to move forward together in the time left; they did not wish the time away but were fully present to one another and available for God's purposes; they were not distracted by information offered from the sidelines that missed the matters of the heart at hand. And finally, neither held back a part of themselves but remained vulnerable to the love between them, which is another name for God, until the end. I do not know what any of this really means as I stand at the beginning of the different time we will share. I can only invite you to trust with me that this time is in the hands of the love that will not let this church or her future go.

Now there is another way to spend this time and for a glimpse of that way we turn to Mark's telling of Jesus' Transfiguration. Our text begins, "Six days later," inviting us to remind ourselves what had happened six days before Jesus was transfigured. Six days ago Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" In response, Elijah, among others, was mentioned. "Who do you say that I am?" he asked the twelve. Peter answers, "You are the Messiah," and Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about him. Then he begins to teach them about the time ahead, about his suffering, his rejection by religious authorities, his murder and his rising.

Here Peter offers us another way to spend this time. Peter rebukes Jesus and in Matthew he even says, "*God forbid it Lord.*" In a word, we can spend this time in denial that the road ahead will be challenging, that the future will require us to change, that new things will be asked of us, that our witness to God's reign may actually threaten the way things have been. Looking at all the disciples, Jesus rebukes Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your minds not on divine things but on human things." Human things being security, invulnerability, scarcity, status. Divine things being risk, trust, hope, love.

Then Jesus calls the crowd (read, in Mark's time, the church) to join the disciples and suggests a third way to spend the time, saying, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it." With Ash Wednesday only three days away, Jesus is saying to us that the time has come round again, if we intend to follow him to the cross, to let go of the life we hold on to when we set our minds on security, invulnerability, scarcity and status, and to receive with open and vulnerable hearts and minds a whole new life of risk, trust, hope and love that is the cross. I think he says this to us as individuals, but he also says it to his church, to this congregation.

Six days later, he takes Peter and James and John up a mountain where the miracle is not done by him but to him, Karl Barth says. They glimpse God's glory in Jesus and the sight will be enough to strengthen them as they face their own deaths for his sake. But of most significance for the transition ahead of us is the appearance of a cloud, "the symbol both of concealment and revelation" that overshadows them. A voice speaks to the disciples from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." Like Elisha's "be silent," his eye on Elijah until he could no longer see him, listening to God's Word seems to me to be the only faithful way to spend the time we yet have been given together.

After a season of denial, Peter would spend the rest of his life, until his own crucifixion, listening to Christ's words. Remembering God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ on the mountain that day, he wrote to the early church: "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses to his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven...." We ourselves have also heard this voice and it is enough to go on. Therefore in the time ahead, let us keep on keeping on, listening to him, being vulnerable to one another, letting go of the life we possess without him, receiving the life we are given in him, trusting the future to him, and loving him as we love one another. Amen.