

FIRST LESSON: 2 Kings 2:1-12
SECOND LESSON: Mark 9:2-9
February 11, 2024

“Elijah”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

As I started working on this sermon I began to reflect on names. When I was growing up, I did not know ANYONE named Elijah. Today Elijah is the 4th most popular boy’s name. One out of every 300 boys under the age of 10 in the United States is now named Elijah. Noah, another name I never dreamed would ever be given to a child, is number one! Moses, on the other hand, while quite popular in the 1880s has not exactly rebounded. Moses seems to be a more intimidating figure than Elijah. Yet it was Moses and Elijah who met with Jesus on the mountain when he was transfigured.

Today I thought we might focus a bit on the mysterious figure of Elijah. He was not exactly without controversy during his life. In fact, his entire life involved controversy and conflict. Elijah emerged from Tishbe in Gilead in the north. King Ahab had just married Jezebel, a foreign wife. Jezebel had influence and introduced the Baal cult alongside the worship of Yahweh. From her perspective this was entirely reasonable and logical. There were many gods, and what was the problem of adding another one? The entire ancient world operated that way. It was not considered wise to offend a god. But Elijah was an uncompromising and passionate monotheist. And when Ahab allowed Jezebel to introduce the worship of Baal he proclaimed a three year drought in the land.

It was Elijah who engaged in an all out battle with the prophets of Baal daring them to call down fire from their god, which they failed to do, and then after soaking the altar with water successfully called down fire from the God of Israel. It was also Elijah who crashed after that high into a low of deep depression, fleeing Jezebel’s forces until he finally found safety in a cave and was able to perceive God in a “still small voice.” Elijah was a prophet of the battlefield, a prophet engaged in constant conflict. His very name meant “God is Yahweh.” And Elisha was his servant and apprentice.

The geography of the travels of Elijah at the end of his life mean nothing to us. In fact, it really doesn’t make a whole lot of sense from a traveler’s point of view either. They go in a great big circle. It appears random. But Elijah’s last journey with Elisha followed the path of Moses and Joshua. While still in the wilderness Moses commissioned a group of men to enter Canaan and spy out the land. They did so, but upon their return the news they brought was daunting. This land was full of strong settlements and well-armed fortresses. Only Joshua and Caleb felt they could proceed. Everyone else was too afraid.

As a result, the people wandered in the wilderness for another 40 years until most of that generation had died. At the end of the 40 years Moses and Joshua traveled once more as far as the shore of the Jordan. But Moses died at that point, never entering the promised land. It was Joshua who led the people across the Jordan and Joshua who led Israel. Gilgal is where the Israelites crossed the Jordan River. Bethel is part of their journey and Jericho the site of their first great victory. Elijah and Elisha followed this path, finally returning to the Jordan and crossing over to the far side, the side where Moses had died. And at each stop on the way Elijah told Elisha to stay there while he went on ahead alone, and each time Elisha refused.

We don't know what the repeated instructions to stay and refusal to do so was about. Was it a test of Elisha's commitment and endurance? Because despite the fact that we don't know, we can see the parallel quite easily between Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha. At the same place that Joshua lost Moses, Elisha lost Elijah. Unlike Moses, Elijah did not die, however. Elijah was taken into heaven, leaving Elisha to carry on and lead the people.

The figure of Elijah became fixed in the Jewish imagination. It was prophesied that Elijah would come before the Messiah, and for Christians John the Baptist fulfills that role. Because Elijah never actually died there are countless legendary accounts of Elijah coming in various disguises to help people. Elijah could apparently even appear to be female under the right circumstances. And of course, most of us are familiar with the practice of setting a place at the table for Elijah at Passover. As far as we can tell this was not always done. It began around the 11th century.

We know that Elijah existed. We know that he was a powerful character and a passionate protagonist of monotheism. The stories about him were written down centuries later, however, and are a blend of numerous oral traditions. The authors of these stories did not have our concept of "pure unbiased history," even though such a thing does not actually exist. Even the most careful of historians show bias and preference in what they report and how they report it. But these stories were told and written down to show the power and glory of God. Was there a bit of exaggeration on occasion? Likely. Some pure myth? Probably. But what we do know is that Elijah was a powerful prophet, and like Moses he had a younger man he mentored, and also like Moses at a certain point it became time to pass the torch.

Could this possibly be what Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah about? Jesus knew he would not be on earth forever. But unlike Moses and Elijah he also knew that he was not going to be passing on the responsibility to one person, but to many. The question is how to do it: how to train one's successors so that they in turn will be successful.

When Elijah and Elisha had crossed to the other side of the Jordan Elijah had asked Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

And Elisha had responded, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit."

I always thought that Elisha was asking for twice as much power as Elijah, but in fact, what Elisha was more likely doing was asking for the

inheritance of the oldest son, who always received a double portion of what the others got. In this case there were no other children, so Elisha was asking for his full inheritance. He was asking to carry on where Elijah left off. Elijah determined that such a thing was up to God, saying, “You have asked a difficult thing, yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”

The disciples saw the resurrected Jesus, and they saw Jesus ascend to God. We have been given the full inheritance of Christ. The mantle of Elijah literally fell on Elisha. The mantle of Christ has fallen on us. We are charged with carrying on Jesus’ mission here on earth.

What is the mission of the church? Why are we gathered here together? Today’s churches are shrinking. What is happening here in Penn Wynne is happening everywhere. We seem to have lost our purpose. In the past century the church has gone through many phases. We’ve been focused on sin and preaching hellfire. We have ignored sin altogether and provided a lot of very nice social outlets, which worked for awhile until society provided a lot of other nice social outlets. Some in the church have been consumed by a desire for social justice and been activists. But none of it, without a living and real connection to Jesus, is our mission. The church is not a club. It is not even a group of social activists, despite the fact that pursuing justice is part of our calling. Yes, we are to serve people, and yes, we are to advocate on behalf of people and the earth, to address injustice and speak on behalf of the voiceless. But because we don’t want to offend people, we have been serving others without saying a word about Jesus. We help but withhold that which would really help—a living genuine faith, a faith that sometimes acknowledges the reality of sin and the need to repent and turn around.

I have often thought that it is so much easier in twelve step communities. If a newcomer has questionable ethics, they will be called out on it. Why? Because people with questionable ethics don’t stay sober. The ability to be honest is essential to recovery. It’s not a matter of moralizing or judging. It is just pragmatic. People who know that their very life depends upon living right will do everything in their power to help others along the way do the same thing, and they won’t worry about phrasing it correctly.

The people around us are in danger of losing their lives. And we are doing nothing to help them. We can provide food and shelter, but other agencies do that. We can advocate on behalf of the oppressed, but that is not unique to Christians. What is unique about our calling is our faith. It is our relationship with the one who saved us. And sharing that relationship IS our mission. This does not mean pointing the finger at people and telling them that what they are doing is wrong. It also does not mean that we have to have an encyclopedic knowledge of theology and be able to answer any question. It means doing what our sisters and brothers in 12 step recovery groups do. We simply share what works for us. There are no “you shoulds” involved. It is all “this is what works for me, this is what I have experienced, this is what I believe.”

It is also essential that what our actions say match our words. People are watching us. They know how we are when we are tired. They know if we will take a kick back or tell a lie. We are to live in such a way that we represent

Jesus and his values so vividly to the world that they will see the nature of God. We are to love with God's love, and we are to speak God's truth.

Elijah prepared Elisha to carry on by mentoring him. He spent time with him, years in fact. He taught him by word and example. Moses prepared Joshua to take over by mentoring him as well. They spent many years together. He taught him by word and example. But Jesus has passed his mantle on to us, and we no longer have him physically present with us. Yet we still need to learn. Jesus' command is to "go and make disciples," and a disciple is just a learner. We are all students of one master, learning together. And to do this, **we need each other.**

"Of what point is the church?" people ask. "I can be a Christian on my own. I feel more spiritual feeding the poor than attending a worship service." But the church is not a building. The church is a people, it is a body of people who all have different gifts that complement one another. And the church is a training ground of faith where we learn what scripture says, and we experience in real life how to get aggravated with one another AND still love that person and forgive them. There are many things that we can't learn solo. It's easy being a lone ranger because there are no challenges. But Paul wrote in Ephesians that, "Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Moses taught Joshua. Elijah taught Elisha. Jesus taught his first disciples who in turn shared what they learned from him with us through the scriptures. We do not actually need a particular form of worship. We do not even need a building. But we do need to gather as the body of Christ in order to fulfill Christ's purpose for us in the world. Amen.

2 Kings 2:1-12

2 When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.² 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.

3 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."

4 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.

5 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."

6 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.

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.
¹⁰ “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.”
¹¹ 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. ¹² 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

² 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. ³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.
⁵ 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.” ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)
⁷ Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”
⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.
⁹ 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.