

“Preview and Power” GPPC 2-11-18
2 Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9

The Bible, ancient and holy book that it is, is also filled with some really strange stories. And this morning we’ll reflect on two of those stories. We’ll focus not just on how odd they are, but more importantly what they remind us God is still doing today.

First, we hear about Elijah and Elisha, prophets of the Old Testament. Prophets of the time served as spokespersons for God. “A channel of communication between the human and divine worlds,” as one scholar puts it. (Robert R. Wilson in *Harpers Bible Dictionary*, 826.) Often they spoke God’s uncomfortable, challenging truth to comfortable, unchallenged power. And power never seemed to like it much. And still does not.

Elijah is remembered especially for four stories in the Bible. First, he announces a drought that finally ends with a contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal to see who is serving the real God (1 Kings 16-19). As you may recall, things do not end well for the prophets of Baal. Second, he confronts King Ahab with God’s judgment when Ahab

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allows his wife, Jezebel, to misuse his royal power and have a man murdered in order for the king to take his vineyard (1 Kings 21). Third, in another story, Israel's King Ahaziah falls and suffers a serious injury. He sends messengers to ask one of the prophets of the Philistine gods if he is going to get better. But before they can get there, they are intercepted by Elijah who says, "Nope. You're going to die in your bed." (2 Kings 1-2)

So we notice a pattern. The false prophets of Baal do not fare well with Elijah, and neither do some of Israel's corrupt kings. Elijah's prophetic words are not for entertainment; they have immense power, power that comes from God.

Finally, we come to the fourth story. Elisha becomes a disciple and a fellow prophet of Elijah. And this morning we read how Elijah is actually succeeded by Elisha. (1 Kings 19 and 2 Kings 2) And, yes, it is a weird story, but it's also a story that teaches us something by its pattern.

Elijah and Elisha are on their way from Gilgal. Elijah says to Elisha, "You go ahead and stay here, because God has sent me at very minimum to Bethel." And Elisha says, "There is no way I'm going to leave you."

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So the two men keep traveling to Bethel. They get there and a whole company of prophets comes out to Elisha and says, “Do you know God’s going to take your master away from you today?”

Well, that’s kind of a showstopper question, isn’t it? But Elisha says, “Yeah, I know. Now be quiet about it.”

Elijah says, “Stay here, because God’s sending me to Jericho.” And Elisha says, “There’s no way I’m going to leave you.” So they go to Jericho. And once again a company of prophets comes out and says, “Do you know God’s going to take your master away from you today?”

Same question. This is getting irritating. Elisha says to them, “Yeah, I know. Now be quiet about it.”

So then Elijah says, “Stay here, because God’s sending me to Jordan.” And what does Elisha say? Repeat it with me. “There’s no way I’m going to leave you.”

So they get to Jordan and this time fifty prophets come and finally they’re quiet. They stand at a distance and watch as Elijah and Elisha stand in the Jordan. Elijah whacks the water with a rolled up coat, sort of

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a Moses and staff move, but with rolled up clothing. And the two men walk across on dry land, kind of like Moses parting the Red Sea.

They get across and Elijah says to Elisha, “When God takes me, what do you want?” And Elisha does not ask for cash, property, or a new car. He simply asks for a double inheritance share of Elijah’s spirit (which would be two thirds of what Elijah possesses). Elijah says, “This is hard, but if you watch as I am taken from you, you can have it.”

And this part of the story always reminds me of the Star Wars movie scene when good guy Obi Wan Kenobi is fighting the evil Darth Vader. And at one point, Obi makes sure his protégé, Luke, is watching. Then he lowers his light saber and allows Darth Vader to strike him down. Luke sees and screams, “No!” And Vader imagines he has won, but, in fact, in his death Obi’s power has been transferred to Luke. Shouldn’t George Lucas be paying royalties to the writer of 2 Kings?

Back to our story. When the time comes for Elijah to go, all heaven breaks loose—a chariot of fire, horses of fire, whirlwind, you name it. But the pyrotechnics do not have to be understood literally. What they’re meant to convey is the awesome and uncontrollable

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presence and power of God. And when Elijah ascends in a whirlwind into heaven, this is a way of saying that he is no ordinary person. He is God's special prophet. And Elisha does watch this all unfold, thus ensuring that the double share of Elijah's spirit will be transferred to him.

So maybe in our competitive, dog eat dog, scramble to the top of the ladder world we might expect Elisha to be celebrating. "At last, I'm the top prophet! No more second fiddle for me! First chair, at last, baby!"

But no. The story ends with Elisha crying, "Father, father!" and tearing his clothes as a sign of grief.

Bible scholars say this is a story about prophetic succession. And it is. But I wonder if maybe in another way this is also a story everybody in this room has experienced at one time or another. You see it's a story about the people we look up to, our mentors, our teachers, our fellow church members, our family and friends who shape us.

Do you see the pattern? The mentor leads and the student refuses to leave his or her side, no matter what. People say, "You know this

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person you respect, and listen to, and love, is going away?” And the student says, “Yes, I know. Quit talking about it. It hurts too much.”

And then when it comes time for the mentor to go, the student watches not only how the mentor lives but how the mentor leaves or even dies. In it all the student inherits a double share of the mentor’s spirit. The student is not greater than the mentor. Yet the student has walked with him or her, learned from the mentor, and finally been there until the end.

Do you have an Elijah like that in your life? I hope so. I have lost two Elijahs in the last year.

During my three years at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, I had taken as many classes as I could from David Bartlett, a professor I admired and loved who taught preaching and New Testament courses there. David was a kind man, and also a man who would speak out for God’s justice, especially for racial justice and justice for LGBT folks. He had been speaking out for both since the beginning of his career, first as a pastor, in the 1970s. Once I said to him, “I’ll bet you got crucified for speaking out for LGBT rights back then.” He answered, “Crucified, no. Slandered, yes.” A few days before graduation, I bought

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him a book as a going away gift. I'd heard through the grapevine that he would be leaving the seminary to become a professor at Yale Divinity School. I was happy for him, but it made me sad. After chapel one day, I walked David up to his office. I said, "I heard you are leaving." "Yes," he said, "But you are too." "Yes."

"Don't you know your master is leaving?" "Yes, but be quiet about it."

My other Elijah was named Sandra Rushing. Sandra had grown up in a hard-living home in the mountains of Virginia. As an adult she'd worked in the oil business for a while. Eventually, she became a Presbyterian pastor, and then an Executive Presbyter who helped to oversee all the Presbyterian churches in an area. She was tough as nails. Had a heart as big as a house. And would fight like mother lion to protect the underdog. Once when attempting to moderate a meeting with a difficult congregation's leadership, Sandra just yelled back and said, "I can yell too, but that's not how we're going to conduct this meeting!" She ended up bringing a peace candle and doing some silent, centering prayer as part of the meeting. And some of the leaders hated that too.

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But Sandra would not be intimidated or stopped. She died this year after a series of strokes. I will always miss her.

Who do you have in your life who is an Elijah to you, a person who has been an example, a mentor, a friend you have respected and loved? Who do you have?

We have some Elijahs walking around this church right now. Some of them are feisty. Some are gentle. Some are visible. Some are in the background. They all are prophetic people who will speak God's truth in love, and speak the truth in love to power. And as we celebrate 70 years as a congregation, we have had some Elijahs in the past too, members who built and sustained this church as they followed our supreme mentor, Jesus Christ. Can you think of them?

A character in one of Wendell Berry's stories says, "When people who mattered to me died I began to feel that something was required of me. Sometimes something would be required that I could do, and I did it. Sometimes when I didn't know what was required, I still felt the requirement. Whatever I did never felt like enough." (Wendell Berry, *A Place in Time*, 171.)

Have you ever felt that requirement, that responsibility? These Elijahs have gone before us, and now I believe they root for us and pray for us from heaven. And you and I are called to follow their example and to be examples for others, for the next generation. Are we ready? Are we saying and doing what we should be doing for God, for this church, and for the world? Are we speaking and acting in ways that please God? Because it's not easy to keep following. We might get distracted, or simply give up.

We glance at the story of Jesus and the Transfiguration, and the scholars will tell us many things about this peculiar scene. But maybe one important thing to see is that in the Transfiguration, God is once again reminding the disciples that they are on the right track. Jesus really is who God says he is—Lord and Savior and our Ultimate Guide.

So they are right to follow him, even when it gets hard. And in the Transfiguration God gives the disciples a preview of who Jesus is so that the disciples can be given courage and power for the journey that lies ahead.

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I invite you, if you are willing, to close your eyes now. Close your eyes and imagine someone who has been a mentor to you in the faith. Someone who has taught you by what she or he has said and done. Maybe someone who has spoken God's truth, even when it has been uncomfortable. Maybe a teacher, or a church member, or a friend, or someone else. Can you see that person or persons? Give God thanks. And now can you and I be those people, those mentors, those Elijahs for others? We will not be perfect. We will make mistakes. But can we also be a source of strength and guidance, knowing that our ultimate strength and guidance comes from Jesus our Lord and Savior? Pray for God to use us, even us, as the reign of God comes, relentless, unstoppable, and glad. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal