

Last Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
II Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
II Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

What an interesting juxtaposition we have today! We've got **Elijah** and **Elisha** navigating **Elijah's** departure, *and* we've got **Peter**, **James**, and **John** navigating a mystical reunion/encounter involving **Elijah**, **Moses**, and **Jesus**. And the approaches couldn't be further apart.

Let's dial into **Elijah** and **Elisha** first. **The Lord is about to take Elijah up into heaven by a whirlwind, which also means being taken from Elisha. Elijah keeps trying to get Elisha to stay behind, but Elisha refuses to leave him. The peanut gallery of prophets calls out to Elisha, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?"** It's hard to know if their proclamation to **Elisha** has the feel of a *taunt*, a *we-know-something-you-don't-know*, a *nah-nah-nah-nah-nah*, or a genuine *we-feel-for-you-that-you're-about-to-lose-your-master* sensibility. Regardless of what they mean by their statement, **Elisha** doesn't want to hear it—"Yes, I know; *keep silent; be still; don't say or do a thing; nip it.*"

And **Elijah** and **Elisha** and the **peanut gallery prophets** repeat this dance at **Bethel** and **Jericho** and the **Jordan**—*at least by the third round at the Jordan*, the prophets had learned to hold their tongue and just stayed silent on the front-end.

When they get to the **Jordan**, **Elijah** takes his mantle, rolls it up, and strikes the water, and the water parted in two, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. When they'd crossed, **Elijah** said to **Elisha**, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." **Elisha** said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."

As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and **Elijah** ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. **Elisha** kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, [**Elisha**] grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

And though we don't hear it in today's passage, **Elisha** then picked up **Elijah's** mantle that had fallen to the ground, and went back to the bank of the **Jordan**. He took **Elijah's** mantle, and he struck the water, and the water parted, and he crossed over. Indeed, **Elijah's** spirit had come to **Elisha**.

What a lesson in leave-taking! Any of you who have been through the dying process of a loved one know this dance. That *wrenching parting* with *one going* and the *other staying behind*. That desire to protect the *one staying*, trying to shield them from that final goodbye. That desire of the *one staying* to stay connected to the *one going*. That fierce commitment to see it through, *all the way to the end*, knowing that, hard as it is, there is something important about **bearing witness**

to the parting; there is something important about *maintaining presence* in that threshold space. There is the deep desire to have *that spirit* that you have so loved, who has so impacted you, *come into your being*, so that you will have that love and wisdom *always*. It's holy ground.

And there is no shortage of **peanut gallery prophets** in this situation, trying to alert you to what is coming, calling out to you, as if the sheer knowledge of what's coming will allow you to guard your heart to protect it from the blow of the goodbye. *But that's not how it works*. **Elisha** intuitively knows this. No, **Elisha makes a choice**—what is to be gained by being *fully present* to the *parting* and *exposing one's heart* to the *fullness of the loss* **far outweighs** whatever one *thinks might be gained by guarding one's heart*. It's awfully hard to *receive the blessings* that come in the threshold space *if you close up your heart from the pain*. **The spirit is on the move in these transitions, and it's looking for an open and receptive heart to fall into.**

But we need an important caveat here—this is not a prescription for every leave-taking. Sometimes, there is **no time** to choose to be present *or* to guard one's heart; sometimes, someone is **ripped from our lives suddenly** and **without warning**. That's a different dynamic, and complicated. It often takes *longer* to navigate this terrain, but the *yearning and love* between those who have crossed over *and* those who remain is a heck of homing beacon for the **spirit** to use to find its way *from those who've gone on to those who remain*. Again, **willingness to receive the inheritance of that spirit** is often the *necessary precursor to receiving the gift of it*.

And receiving that spirit is costly. In *either* case, one has to **grieve the loss of the tangible presence to receive the spiritual one**. **Elisha tore his clothes in two**. *The loss is real; his grief is real*, and so too with us.

And we may not move with the speed of Elisha. It may take us a *long time* to **pick up the mantle that has fallen to us**, but oh, what is to be *discovered* when we finally **bend over and pick it up**. What amazing *transformation* happens when we **take that mantle and feel it in our hands and make it our own**; *what power is waiting to manifest anew!*

Hold this scene in your mind and in your heart for just a bit.

Now, jump over to the **gospel** with me. Here, **Jesus has taken Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves**. No indication here that **Peter, James, and John** particularly *wanted* to go—**Jesus** led them there. But whether they wanted to be there *or* not, **Jesus was transfigured right there before their eyes and his clothes became dazzling white**. **And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses talking it up with Jesus**.

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” And the next sentence illuminates why **Peter's** seemingly innocent suggestion is misguided. The text tells us: **He did not know what to say, for they were terrified**. Peter makes the suggestion to **contain Elijah and Moses and Jesus** because **he is terrified, exceedingly afraid, and in his fear, Peter did not know what to say; in his fear, he could not simply keep silent, stay still, be present; in his fear, his anxiety** stepped into the driver's seat and proclaimed, *“We'll just build little dwellings around these three*

presences, right here atop this mountain, and here they'll stay, and we'll always know where to come back and mark this holy moment of mystical encounter."

*But that's not how mystical encounter works, and **God tells them as much** in the next divine breath. First, they have to be **plunged into the cloud** to *disrupt their neat and tidy plan of divine containment*, so that they can *get their eyes off of the vision that they think they comprehend*, and *get their ears opened to the deeper **spirit** at work*. And **from the cloud there came a voice**, "**This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!**"*

The **wisdom of Jesus**, the **teaching of Jesus**, the **spirit of Jesus** is *not something to be enshrined*, it is **something to be listened to and internalized**. It is meant to be *fluid* and to *move with us* and *in us* and *through us* as *we move about our lives*. But taking this **Presence** into our being requires that we *don't try to fix it* or *contain it* in our anxiety or fear; it requires that we **follow it** to the *next place* and to the *place beyond that* and to the *place beyond that*, even when the **peanut gallery** is telling us that it's all a hoax, and that, at some point, **we're going to lose our master**. **Elisha intuitively knows different**, and in time, **Peter** and **James** and **John will know different, too**.

This master is never going to leave us. This master has taken up residence within us. His spirit animates our own spirit. We who journey to the **cross** and the **empty tomb** beyond, **we have received his spirit**, and *not just a double share*, but **his spirit in its complete and utter fullness**. **His resurrection life and power live in us**.

Jesus needs no monument to his presence, neither does **Elijah** or **Moses**—no, **they long for us to pick up their mantles of love and compassion and justice and right relationship and holiness of life** and to *move back into the world manifesting their light everywhere we go*.

*They don't want to **enshrine their conversation**; they want us to be in perpetual conversation with them* in the situations that confront us when we *leave the mountaintop*.

If we **enshrine** either the *leave-taking* or the *threshold moments when the realms collide*, **then we stop the flow of **Presence** and **Love** that is always moving, always living, always seeking to illuminate our hearts** because that **Presence** and **Love** is *not static; it's not stationary*; that **Love** and **Presence** is *always growing and deepening and expanding*.

Why on earth would we think these would stop growing just because death on this earth has happened? *No, the communion of saints pulses with life as hearts keep discovering deeper and deeper levels of love*. Why would we want to stop that process for those who've *gone on*, or for ourselves who *remain*, and miss what they still might yet teach us?

*It takes courage to stay present through the partings in our lives. And it takes courage not to enshrine the moments where we last gazed upon one another. And it takes courage to pick up the mantles that have now fallen to us and to step forward in faith and power trusting that the **wisdom** that used to be out there in the other now lives in here.*

When you are **tempted in your fear to do *something*** because you just don't know what to say, **do *nothing* instead**—simply stay present, be still, let the cloud overshadow you *and* reorient you. **Listen for the voice of the Beloved; know that he lives within you.**

*You don't need to build dwellings for the **Beloved** and **his companions** because the **spirit of Elijah**, the **spirit of Moses**, the **spirit of Jesus**, *the spirit of those you've loved—these are already dwelling in you.* **Pick up the mantle and move forward with confidence**—your spirit is **rich and strong and wise** *for all these saints are guiding you from within.* Amen.*

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