

“Taking the Kit with the Caboodle” Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner

2 Kings 2: 1-14; Mark 9:2-9

Our lectionary readings for today, from the Old Testament and the gospel, are similar in that they are both what we might call mystical or even metaphysical in nature. In both readings, there are powerful visions of glory: chariots of fire coming to sweep Elijah up in a whirlwind in the Old Testament; then Jesus transfigured into glowing light as he stands with Moses and Elijah on a mountaintop in the Gospel reading. But even as the two texts are similar, there is also a significant difference which I, for one, had not noticed before. And that is that while the mystical experience in the gospel seems to be a joyful one, (Peter wants to preserve it, after all, by building containers to nail the experience down and hang onto it.) While the gospel is a joyful story, the Old Testament text, even in the midst of flaming chariots, is really a text about loss and grief. And scripture seems to suggest that as people of faith, we have to be ready to accept both: both the mountaintop experiences of spiritual highs, and the valley of the shadow times where, like Elisha, we rend our garments in mourning over the loss of a best friend.

James Broughton said it this way:

Take the whole kit
with the caboodle.
Experience life (all of it.)
and don't deplore or avoid it.
Shake hands with time
don't kill it.
Open a lookout,
Dance on a brink,
Run with your wildfire.
You are closer to glory
leaping an abyss
than upholstering a rut.

So today's two mystical experiences remind us that God wants to be an intimate part of our lives through it all- the joy and the pain; and that in order to learn what we need to learn to come into our own spiritual wholeness, we have to be willing to engage fully, to lean into, all of it. To everything there is a season.

And toward that end I'd like to focus on the Old Testament reading today. Because I really did see it in a whole different way this time. (That's part of what makes scripture so amazing: the fact that you can read a passage one way all your life, then suddenly it explodes open in a whole new way.)

So, to the story of Elijah, senior prophet and mentor, and Elisha- Israel's prophet in training, mentee, who will take up Elijah's work after he is gone. First we are told that the time had come for Elijah to depart. Verse one says that God was about to "take him up" and we can assume that means permanently. Both Elijah and Elisha know that their leave-taking from one another is imminent, but initially it seems that neither one wants to face it. And yet they are avoiding it in totally different ways. Elijah wants to sneak out the side door. Three times he tells Elisha that he is going on to a new city, but that Elisha should stay where he is. Elijah may have been thinking God will come for him while they are apart and neither of them will have to go through the raw pain of actually saying goodbye. Three times Elijah tries this move (a move many of us have probably used in avoiding goodbyes, trying one way or another to sneak out the real or metaphorical door before anybody notices) but three times Elisha refused to comply. Now Elisha was in denial himself, don't get me wrong. He refused to be left behind because he wasn't ready to let go! He was going to stick to Elijah like glue to make sure that he couldn't go anywhere! And when the community tried to tell him, three different times, "you know today is

the day that the Lord is going to take your master away from you?," three times he said, "I know but keep silent!"

There's another way many of us try to avoid the pain of leave taking: we give the message, overtly or covertly, that we do not want to talk about it. Families so often keep silent when someone is dying. They know what's going on. The dying person knows what's going on. But they think somehow if they don't talk about it, it won't be real, or at least they won't have to feel the pain. But the result is that everybody is alone and isolated in their avoidance of the subject. When someone finally breaks the ice and names it, then even though it's painful, at least it is real and alive and engaged! Then there can be closeness and love as loved ones are free to say things like "thank you" and "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you" and most certainly "I love you." It is painful, don't get me wrong, but it is real and clean and it is pain that leads eventually to healing, rather than keeping you stuck in isolation. You're going to be in pain in either case, so why not opt for pain that at least brings closeness and love, and leads eventually to a kind of healing.

Well, Elijah and Elisha were coming to this slowly. It took three separate stops on their journey, three times for the community to say, "You are going to have to face this and stop trying to hang on" before Elijah, wise mentor to the end, came around and realized that they each had to give up their particular method of denial, and face up to what was happening. So finally, Elijah breaks the ice and says to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you." And Elisha, with heart-breaking honesty, cries, "give me a double portion of your Spirit." It's like he is saying, "promise that somehow your spirit will stay with me even if you are bodily gone, and that you will help me because I don't know what I'm doing yet. I am not ready to fill your shoes. I don't want to be first string!"

It's a rite of passage that many of us have had to face. My friend Bev, who is here today, says that her family calls it "moving into first chair." It's when we become the matriarchs and patriarchs and can no longer defer to somebody else to be responsible and run the world. I am facing it right now as my mother, a wise woman who has taught me so much and been a kind of spiritual mentor for me, is herself preparing to "be taken up." She is ready, and is talking about it with an openness that has already brought our family closer. But even though she is ready, like Elisha, my siblings and I do NOT feel ready to move into first chair. There is a freedom in that feeling that somebody's out there who is wiser and more capable and will run the show. I am not ready to be the one the younger generations look to for wisdom. I don't want to pick up that mantle yet! And I most certainly do not want to let go of my mother. Even though I respect her decision to lean into her dying process with openness and grace, there is a part of me that is still a little girl and does not want to let go. That's just the way it is for us humans, beautiful messes that we are. Its rarely neat and tidy.

But Elijah, wise mentor that he is, learns from his mistake of trying to sneak out the side door. And he knows this is perhaps his last, great teaching for Elisha, who still does not want to talk about it. And so, when Elijah breaks the ice and says to Elisha, "what can I do for you to help you deal with this?" and Elisha says "you can promise that your spirit will stay with me." Elijah delivers the news, "You can carry my spirit on with you, but to do that, you have to stay the course right to the end, you have to watch me go." In other words, if you are going to receive the blessing part of this painful lesson, you have to stay engaged, avoid denial and lean into the whole lesson as it plays out."

In the end, Elisha steps up to the plate and does so. The chariot of fire swings low to pick up Elijah and the text says “Elisha kept watching, crying out “Father, Father!” and when Elijah is finally gone, Elisha rends his garment, the classic sign of profound grieving.

Through the step by step journey that this story recounts, Elisha has gone from “Keep silent and do not speak of it” to staying present to the whole experience, and finally rending his garments and expressing full throated grief.

And once Elisha gives himself over to the whole experience, something amazing happens. Then and only then, after experiencing the loss and the pain directly, is he able to pick up Elijah’s mantle, roll it up and use it as a rod to part the waters, and walk freely across to the new land. This, of course, is meant to echo Moses parting the Red Sea and leading the people out of bondage into freedom. Elisha is walking into the freedom of having become the fullest version of himself. By staying engaged with the whole kit and caboodle, the joy and the sorrow all along the journey, he is ready now to take up the mantle of his life. He is stepping finally into his own God-given power and authority. He is no longer sitting second chair. He is no longer deferring to others to tell him how to live his life, no longer giving other people power over him. The poet May Sarton said it this way:

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces...
But now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!...
O, in this single hour I live

All of myself and do not move.

How about you, have you become your full self? Picked up the mantle God has for you and your life? Or are you still somehow sitting second chair, still giving other people too much power, giving their opinions too much weight? We are all works in progress, of course and this becoming takes a whole lifetime. But it happens more effectively when it happens consciously, when we knowingly lean into the fullness, both the joy and the sorrow, of whatever the journey has for us. And so I ask you today, what would it mean for you to pick up the mantle? To stop giving other people or outside forces too much power, and to step into the fullness of the person God created you to be?

May we lean into all of it, the kit and the caboodle, the dancing and the grieving, and may we then pick up our mantles and find ourselves liberated to walk across the parted sea into freedom, into God's promised land.

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