

The 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 is the deeply moving and profound story of the transfer of Elijah's charisma to Elisha, so that Elisha clearly becomes Elijah's successor. As we developed in last Sunday's Old Testament lesson, God promised Elijah a companion who would be with him in the struggle against the political, economic and religious authorities of Israel who were seeking to subvert the nation's commitment to Yahweh and to make it into a nation under the domination of and existing for the sake of its powerful elite. In reality, what appeared to happen was that, over the remaining years of Elijah's ministry, this great prophet built a "company of prophets" (2:3, 5) of about fifty men (2:7) who followed the master and who shared in his continuing battle with the "principalities and powers". So the followers of Elijah were much larger than simply the person of Elisha. But it was important, in Elijah's passing, that he make quite clear to the company of prophets (and through them, to the powers that be) that it was to be Elisha who was to be his actual successor.

The time had come for Elijah to leave this earth, and thus to turn over leadership of his mission to his chief disciple, Elisha. That occurs in today's Old Testament lesson. The account of Elijah's homecoming begins with the words, "Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal" (2:1). The event that brings Elijah's ministry to a close is noteworthy in two ways. First, Elijah did not die! He is one of only two people in the Bible who are privileged not to die but to be directly taken into heaven (Enoch being the other in Gen. 5:24). Rather, he is bodily transported into heaven "by a whirlwind". The designation of a whirlwind as being the vehicle of Elijah's transport is significant, because it was the phenomenon of a whirlwind that is often used in scripture to indicate a direct appearance of God or of God's intervention (cf. Job 38:1; 40:6; Isa. 29:6; Nahum 1:3). Thus, this statement immediately alerts the reader that something extraordinary is about to happen.

Elisha knows it is time for Elijah's homecoming. His mentor asks Elisha to stay behind and not come with him to his place of transport. But Elisha refuses. He wishes to be with his spiritual father until the very last moment. So Elisha refuses to leave him, and makes that refusal quite clear. "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you", Elisha declares (vs. 6).

The text then tells us that the two men leave the 50 prophet-followers behind, and arrive at the Jordan. There, Elijah rolls up his mantle into a long staff and strikes the river. The water parts and Elijah and Elisha cross on dry land (vss. 7-8). This is an important action, for it indicates the authority of Elijah that will pass to Elisha (as we will see). Twice before, water was struck by a staff and parted to allow a people to cross on dry ground. The first was at the Red Sea, when God parted the waters upon Moses' command, and Israel crossed in safety, escaping almost certain annihilation by the Egyptian army (Exodus 14:21). The second was the entrance of Israel into the Promised Land, when Joshua smote the Jordan River and it parted to let the army and the people cross into Canaan (Josh. 3:14-17). Thus, the author of this account is directly connecting Elijah's power and authority with that of Moses and of Joshua – a strategic connection later in this story.

Elijah and Elisha continue toward the place where Elijah will ascend to heaven. And Elijah says to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you”. Elisha responds, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit”. Elijah says, “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” (vss. 9-10).

Then the text states, “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, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces” (vss. 11-12). Elijah had gone home!

This text is replete with important information and action. First, the request that Elisha made of Elijah was an appeal for the firstborn son’s double portion of the paternal inheritance (Deut. 21:17). In Israel, upon the father’s death, the oldest son received twice the inheritance that the other members of the household received; this was to guarantee that the estate of the father was not dissipated but rather the birthright (and the capacity to carry out that birthright) was passed to the eldest son. Thus the estate and its family would continue. This is what Elisha requested of Elijah – but it was not an estate of money or land or possessions. It was an estate of “charisma” – the Spirit-filled prophetic power that had made Elijah such an intimidating force to Israel’s rulers and leaders and that continuously called the nation back to their covenant with Yahweh.

Elijah’s response was “You have asked a hard thing”. It was not up to Elijah to transfer divinely granted prophetic powers to Elisha. It was only God’s to grant, for it was God who was the ultimate patriarchal father – not Elijah. So Elijah makes the transfer of the divine charisma conditional upon Elisha’s keeping sight of Elijah’s homecoming.

Then the homecoming occurs. Elijah is swept up by “the chariots of Israel and its horsemen” – a whirlwind that carries Elijah to heaven. And Elisha seizes onto that sight, crying out to Elijah, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen” (in fact, it is only Elisha’s words – and what he saw – that tells us what happened; the text doesn’t)! Elisha’s words are significant. The words, “father, father” (closer, “my father, my father”) is a poignant cry, reflecting Elisha’s deep filial love for his mentor, recalling his request for the birthright of the double portion of Elijah’s great spirit! “The chariots of Israel and its horsemen” is a reference to the divine army of Yahweh which the scriptures tell us surrounded both Elijah and Elisha as followers of Yahweh, protecting them as they confronted the powers of the world (Elijah – I Kings 18:38; 19:12; Elisha – II Kings 6:8-23). Elijah had been received by the divine army of Yahweh and carried off to Yahweh’s palace – and Elisha had watched it all happen!

But did the double portion of Elijah’s charisma fall upon Elisha? The story ends with Elisha mourning Elijah’s passing (vs. 12) and picking up the cloak belonging to Elijah (vs. 13). Obtaining that cloak was a symbol that he had indeed become Elijah’s successor (I Kings 19:19). But was that true? The proof of the pudding would be in its tasting!

And the tasting quickly came. Elisha returned to the Jordan River, rolled up the cloak and smote the waters. And the waters parted! Elisha crossed on dry ground! And in so doing, Elisha’s

actions intentionally recalled the action of Moses' disciple – Joshua. Joshua parted the Jordan River to lead the people into the Promised Land as his mentor had parted the Red Sea (Ex. 14; 15; Josh. 3). By so parting the Jordan River, Joshua demonstrated that he was the legitimate successor to the great lawgiver (Num. 27:12-23; Duet. 31:1-8; 34:9; Josh. 1:1-9 and ch. 3). And now Elisha divided the Jordan River as had his mentor only hours earlier. Thus, it had now been clearly demonstrated that Elijah's charisma had indeed passed to Elisha.

On seeing that clear evidence, Elijah's "company of the prophets" declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." "They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him" (2:15). Thus the baton had passed, and the work of empowering the people and calling the systems to accountability had now passed from the old warrior of Yahweh to a new generation and a new leader!

Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20. It is too bad that the lectionary eliminates verses 3 through 10 of Psalm 77, for the absence of those lines removes from any reflection on this Psalm its unique power and its message for those of us who struggle with our faith.

This psalm is one of the earliest hymns in the Psalter, so determined because of its use of the Hebrew language at its most ancient. Scholars tend to see it as a psalm written in the tenth century BCE.¹ It is a psalm of anguish, of the sense of abandonment by God. But it is not simply the abandonment that an individual might feel but rather of that of the nation. Given its early origins, it could have been written at the time of the collapse of the Israelite Empire into the competing nations of Israel and of Judah. The psalm divides into two sections, the first part dealing with the psalmist's sense of national abandonment by God (vss. 1-10) and the second a reflection on God's past acts of liberation that both brought about salvation for Israel and the incontrovertible recognition that their god was, indeed, God (vss. 11-20).

The psalm is introduced by the words, "I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me" (vs. 1). The psalmist prays fervently to God, but receives no answer! The temple seems deadened to any response from God. The ancient Hebrew itself captures the sense of the psalmist's desperation in a way that cannot be translated into English (and would therefore not be appreciated by the English speaking reader). The Hebrew word, *qoti* ("cry") is used and is placed in such proximity to *Elohim* ("God") and preceded by the *waw* that it communicates the most driving intensity. Other translations try their best, limited by their English, to capture the deep aggravation the psalmist is feeling (e.g., "I cry out to God without holding back. Oh, that God would listen to me" [NLV], "With my voice, O God of gods, I desperately cry" [Anchor]). But the point of these opening words is that the psalmist is almost frantic as he demands a response from God. He needs an answer! And he needs that answer NOW!

What is it that the psalmist is so desperate to hear from God? Representing the nation, what the psalmist must have answers about is the great tragedy that has befallen the nation and the people of Israel. There are questions to which the psalmist must have answers. But the very act of asking these necessary questions are so intimidating that he is terribly reluctant and filled with anxiety in asking them. Yet they must be asked! Then comes the questions:

¹ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 51-100, the Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), p. 224.

“Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion” (vss. 7-9)?

These questions capture the stately nature of the Revised Standard Version, inherited from the majesty of the translation of the Psalms in the King James Version. But consider another translation that far better captures the pathos of these questions that is the Hebrew? “Will the Lord always reject us? Will he never again be pleased with us? Has he stopped loving us? Does his promise no longer stand? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has anger taken the place of his compassion” (TEV)?²

Israel as an empire, two nations and a people and this psalmist in particular were facing a major crisis of faith. The empire they thought had been eternally promised to them through God’s covenant with David had now been torn asunder, leaving a remnant of two struggling nations, an abandonment of faith in the northern nation, and a struggle with God in the southern kingdom. So it is that the psalmist, on behalf of the two barely-surviving nations, asks three dreadful questions: Has God rejected the twelve tribes of Israel? Is God’s redemptive and liberating love taken from the people forever? And, worst of all, has the embracing by the people of a politics of power, an economics of greed and a religion of domination³ that drove them to this rupturing of the empire – has that embracing led to God’s abandonment of his *chesedh* love and mercy for his people? In other words, is Israel and is each Israelite rejected and cast off by God? This is the psalmist’s almost-unthinkable question!

It was then that God placed into the mind of the psalmist the answer to his terrible question. “Consider your history”. “When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (vss. 16, 19-20).

“Consider your history”, God in essence said to both the psalmist and the people of Israel. “And consider what I, Yahweh your God, have done for you in the past. I delivered you from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. I freed you from slavery to that mighty empire. I delivered you at the Red Sea when your destruction seemed inevitable. I led you through the wilderness, both making an eternal covenant with you and giving you the Law so that you could follow that covenant, and I brought you into a new land. Yes, you failed me – failed me over and over

² Other translations that capture the pathos of the Hebrew are: “Has the Lord rejected us forever? Will he never again show us favor? Have his promises permanently failed? Has God forgotten to be kind? Has he slammed the door on his compassion” (NLT)? Or consider this one: “Will the Lord walk off and leave us for good? Will he never smile again? Is his love worn threadbare? Has his salvation promise burned out? Has God forgotten his manners? Has he angrily stalked off and left us?” (Eugene Peterson, *The Psalms*)

³ The sin of King Solomon was his corruption of the dream of King David by Solomon’s long-term policy of building the military power, accumulating the greatest wealth and changing Yahwist worship from interpersonal faith and justice to a priestly practice of liturgy encapsulated in the Temple. It was this commitment on the part of Solomon to build an empire of might, wealth and a dominating religion that led to the rupture of the empire under the even-greater domination of his son, King Rehoboam that, in turn, led to the formation of the two nations of Israel (the rebel state) and Judah (the state still loyal to the Davidic monarchy and the Temple) (I Kings 12:1-19).

again. And I have punished you over and over again to bring you to your senses and to bring you back to the embracing of the vision of the shalom community. And I will continue to do so. Therefore, have I rejected Israel? Is my redemptive and liberating love taken from you? Have I removed from you my steadfast, forgiving and consistent love? Look at your own history and answer that question. And you will see I will be your God forever, and you will always be my people! That is what covenant is all about!

Luke 9:51-62 should be labeled (with apologies to Dietrich Bonhoeffer), “The Cost of Discipleship”. This scripture signals a significant shift in Jesus’ agenda. From 9:51 to 19:44, Luke focuses the reader’s attention on Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Such a segment is not found in any of the other three gospel accounts (although there is an overlap of individual stories). Upon what Luke wants to focus the reader is the cost to Jesus of taking the next logical steps of preaching, practicing and living out the kingdom of God on earth – Jesus’ actions necessary to bringing jubilee upon the earth. That cost, to Jesus, is the solemn and steady progress to Jerusalem and the cross that awaits him there. And all those who would follow Jesus must take a similar journey, as they live into the inevitable cost of discipleship that comes from working for Christ and his kingdom!

The march to Jerusalem begins in a Samaritan village. Jesus and his disciples are heading toward that village, so Jesus sends an advance party ahead of him to prepare for his arrival. But the people make it clear that they neither want Jesus to visit them nor do they want to receive the benefits of that visit. This is likely because Jesus is a Jew, and the Samaritans had nothing to do with the Jews; thus, it is the refusal of hospitality – a major offense of that day.

Jesus’ disciples react appropriately to that offense. They ask him, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But Jesus rebukes them for the umbrage they have taken at these Samaritans. They once again reveal themselves as being shortsighted and misguided in wanting to punish this village, for the village has already brought about its own punishment. That punishment was their refusal to receive the blessings that would have been theirs in receiving Jesus. They have hurt no one but themselves by refusing to have Jesus in their midst.

The final story in Luke 9 continues the emphasis on the cost of discipleship. It tells of three unnamed potential disciples who place conditions upon their discipleship. One says, “I will follow you wherever you go”, but is unwilling to go anywhere that would be inconvenient or too costly. Another says he will follow Jesus, but only after the death of his father – an apparently commendable example of filial piety. A third wants to go home before he follows Jesus in order to say “farewell” before he leaves – an apparently innocuous request.

But Jesus responds decisively and even harshly with their requests. To the first, Jesus says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (9:58). To the second, Jesus’ answer seems unnecessarily harsh: “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (vs. 60). To the third, Jesus replies, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (vs. 62).

Jesus' responses seem harsh. But they are, in reality, extremely practical responses. The basic message Jesus is presenting through these three examples is that discipleship is serious business. It is to take the first – and in fact, the only – priority in one's life. Not even obligation to parents or bidding goodbye to one's family (never mind having decent accommodations) compare to the commitment that must come from a disciple if he or she is to be able to undertake authentic discipleship. If you commit yourself to Jesus and his kingdom, then you must stay the course and endure the consequences of such a commitment. For this is the price that must be paid to establish God's shalom kingdom, following Jesus to Jerusalem or anywhere else in the world!

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 initiates a shift in Paul's letter to his churches in Galatia. Up to this point, the apostle has been arguing that authentic Christian faith is one that does not seek to win God's redemptive favor by obeying the Mosaic Law or by doing good deeds. Rather, salvation is a freely given gift of God that we appropriate by receiving. Thus, we are saved, not by our good works (whether moral deeds or obedience to the regulations of the Law), but by Christ's work upon the Christ that we actively embrace. Thus, we are the recipient of salvation, not its initiator. We are not transformed by the redemptive power of Christ's death because of our actions, but because of his!

Now, beginning in chapter five, Paul shifts his focus to develop how a faith incurred by God's saving action is to be lived out in the world. How is faith to be lived out in life? Paul begins, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). Or as Eugene Peterson puts it so simply in *The Message*, "Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand. Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you".⁴

Paul then works with the theme of freedom, building upon the themes of freedom under Christ and slavery under the Law developed throughout the earlier part of this letter. "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another" (vss. 13-15).

Paul has spent considerable effort in demonstrating clearly to the Galatian Christians that they do not need to obey the minutia or the principles of the Mosaic Law in order to earn salvation from Christ. Rather, salvation is a gift given to us by God for us to receive. But how do we respond to that gift? We can say, "Since I am free of the Law, then it is perfectly all right for me to not observe the requirements of the Law instructing me not to steal, kill, commit adultery or covet." In so saying, we can begin to live a life without moral or ethical constraint.

But that is to misunderstand both the Law and the nature of genuine faith in Christ. The freedom we have in Christ does not mean that we have liberty to sin, but freedom from sin (Rom. 6:1-7:6)! Freedom from sin does not provide us with the opportunity for self-indulgence. Rather, to be free from sin means that a greater obligation is laid upon us – the entire intent of the Law

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1993), p. 468.

lived out in the command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 5:43-47; 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28; Rom. 13:8). If a church is a divisive and embattled church where pagans see you “biting and devouring each other”, then these pagans must conclude that this is not an authentically Christian church, for its Christians are not exhibiting the marks of a Spirit-filled people who have truly received Christ’s free gift of salvation. People are to say of us, “Behold, how they love one another” – not, “behold, how they love to fight with one another”!

Paul then goes on to spell out the marks of those who are still living in enslavement to the Law and those who have been truly set free by the Spirit. Those who still remain dominated by the Law and its works are those who commit “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (vss. 19-21). The list is very artfully crafted to begin with the most gross and obvious sins but moving steadily towards more subtle and less obnoxious sins, so that one suddenly realizes that if he may not be fornicating or worshipping idols but is quarreling or being jealous, he is every bit as guilty of the “sins of the flesh” as is his more wanton brother or sister. And such actions, engaged in repeatedly, should cause one to wonder whether or not he truly has embraced the grace of God.

In contrast with these “marks of the flesh”, Paul then presents the signs that one has authentically received Christ as savior and is exhibiting the “marks of the Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (vs. 22).

Paul is not suggesting that occasional acts of strife, jealousy or anger indicate one is not a Christian, nor that if one is not always exhibiting love, joy, patience or self-control, it is clear that one must not be a Christian. To argue that is to return to a belief of salvation by one’s good works, and not by God’s grace. But what Paul is arguing is that one should look at the general tenor of one’s life, and if one sees nothing but “works of the flesh” and no propensity toward the “fruits of the Spirit”, one must take solemn evaluation of one’s self. For to be a Christian means that one has become a part of a community of faith and that if one is acting out the “works of the flesh”, one is slashing away at the fabric of that community’s life, and that should give pause to us. For our task as those who have received the free gift of transformation through Christ is to live out that transformation within that community, thus becoming a “little Christ” (the literal meaning of the word “Christian”) to one another and to the world.

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)