

Sermon Text – Sunday, June 29, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Luke 9:51-62; 2nd Reading: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Scripture for Message: 2 Kings 2:1-18 “Change”

Giving context to what we just read, let me share part of 1 Kings 19:19-21. “So, Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye,” he said, “and then I will come with you.” “Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?” So, Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.”

When I think about Elisha’s story, I think about my cousins on their father’s farm. I think of how they might respond to a calling from a prophet like Elijah and abandon the “plow.” Knowing my cousins and knowing my uncle – it might not have been an easy thing to do. Maybe Elisha’s father was easier to confront – my uncle certainly wasn’t. Nevertheless, one of my cousin’s did abandon the farm to join the military – a higher calling indeed. Elisha too abandoned the farm and family to serve and follow Elijah.

What we just read from 2 Kings brings us to the end of Elijah’s mission and the beginning of Elisha’s. This story is more about Elisha – it represents the change that had to occur as Elijah passed mantle of leadership to him. Both Elijah and Elisha seemed to feel the stress of the change that was about to occur. From what we can read in various scripture about Elijah he frequently preferred the solace of high places and was a bit of an introvert. We can surmise from our reading that Elijah preferred to experience change in solitude, so he told Elisha to remain behind as the LORD directed Elijah from Bethel to Jericho and finally to the river Jordan. It does not appear that this wandering served any purpose except maybe to evaluate Elisha’s loyalty to follow Elijah.

Our reading also informs us that the company of prophets at Bethel and Jericho warned Elisha that the LORD was going to take his master, Elijah, from him that very day. Both times Elisha responded, “Yes I know so be quiet.” I wonder how much that indicates Elisha’s hesitancy to accept what was going to happen, he didn’t want to talk about it. His refusal to stay in the various places Elijah traveled indicates his unwillingness to let go of the connection to his mentor.

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Elisha wanted to stay with Elijah to the very end – watching even as the chariot of fire and the horses of fire carried Elijah away in a whirlwind.

Change is hard – both positive and negative change creates stress. This story illustrates for us that an encounter with the divine will change us and that can cause moments of stressful self-doubt. From the first moment Elijah covered Elisha with his cloak to the moment Elijah's cloak falls from him and Elisha picks it up, God was present. Now the mantle is passed from one generation to the next – it is a hard thing to experience that type of change. One thing these men remembered and can be a lesson for us is that although hard, change is meaningful and bearable because God is the author of change.¹ Keeping that in mind makes change easier and gives us courage to follow where God leads.

I believe what we read from Luke's Gospel further illustrates this point. Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, knowing what he would face along the way and what his fate would be once he arrived in that city. Sending messengers ahead of him he experiences rejection but moves on – rebuking the ones who wanted to retaliate. Luke does not tell us who is saying to Jesus “I will follow you” or who responds to him when he calls “Follow me,” is it disciples or maybe others he encountered along the road who felt that pull to follow Jesus. What we do know is that each of these had excuses, “let me bury my father” or “let me first say farewell to those at my home.”

Remember what I read from 1 Kings earlier – Elisha too had a request from Elijah when he was called – “let me kiss my father and mother goodbye.” I think Elijah's response to him was telling – “What have I done to you?” Maybe Elijah thought twice about what he asked, if Elisha weren't yet ready to leave his parents and accept the mantle of Elijah, how could he be the prophet's protégé? Jesus responds to those offering excuses in much the same manner, no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. He is telling them they must commit themselves to the work in order to follow him – of course it will be hard he tells them that even he has nowhere to lay his head. But the work of the kingdom requires commitment and courage. Committed kingdom workers must also understand that looking back to see the results of your labors will be a fruitless effort – God is the reaper of the harvest and only God knows the results.

¹ Richard D. Nelson. *Interpretation: First and Second Kings*. WJK. 1987 / 2012. Print. 163.

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Then we read Paul's letter to the Galatians who were struggling with how to live in their changed world. How could they respond to this new freedom and liberation through Christ? Maybe they were so used to the demands the "law" of Moses had put upon the Jewish people that they too felt they must follow certain restrictions. Paul reminds them God calls them to freedom, led by the spirit not to self-indulgence but to enjoy the fruits of the spirit. However, among the fruits that Paul lists you will not see "comfort."

Freedom can feel like danger to those who have been slaves to the desires of the flesh. The overwhelming raw fear of change can sometimes draw people and communities to the comfort of familiarity and political correctness.² Maybe we too think there ought to be certain restrictions and requirements to following Jesus. People want to withdraw and become quiet, uncomplaining, law-abiding citizens and think that's safe. The thing is folks; Jesus faces much opposition as he goes toward the cross and promises that his followers will as well, we cannot follow Jesus and escape that fact. There are many competing claims for our allegiance – work, family, nation, ethnicity, possessions, activities, even church – the followers of Christ are called to reprioritize our commitments. Jesus calls us to get on with the work of the kingdom or stop talking about it.

A message that comes out clearly in Paul's letter to the Galatians is that "Authentic Christian discipleship requires both righteous beliefs as well as righteous behaviors" (Furst). Our salvation is based on our belief in Jesus as the Messiah and according to scripture that is the only requirement – works are not commanded. However, when we accept the gift of salvation from Jesus, we are transformed and therefore respond with a desire to serve. This is a change that involves a decision and that might be frightening to some, it may be thought that this decision to be "led by the Spirit" requires a strong effort of the will to overcome the obstacles of this world. In reality however, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Spirit is allowing freedom to enter our lives, to entrust our lives to God's activity and follow God's guidance.

God is actively creating and recreating, renewing, and restoring creation even today. "The Spirit is eager to function with power in the church and in individuals to produce its fruit and only needs to be allowed the opportunity."³ It seems that Elisha was subject to the spirit's guidance when accepting and using

² Renata Furst. "Sunday between June 26 & July 2 inclusive. Galatians 5:1, 13-25 – Connecting the Reading with the World." *Connections, Year C, Vol. 3*. eds. Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2019. Print. 117-119

³ Charles B. Cousar. *Interpretation: Galatians*. WJK. 1982 / 2012. Print. 138

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Elijah's mantle and thus continuing the work Elijah started. Elisha may have been despondent to lose the connection with his mentor, and he showed that by tearing his own cloak – he did however pick up the mantle and used it to cross back over the river Jordan to civilization. We get a sense of the strengthening of his 'calling' by his reply to those who went to look for Elijah – "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

Change and faithful following seem to be the connections between our scripture readings today. What does this mean for the church? Well, I don't think it means that we are safe and comfortable by doing what we have always done without adjusting to the needs of the community surrounding us. I don't think it means that we can look to what worked in the past for guiding our mission and ministry for the future. Change is inevitable for individuals and for churches.

What must a church do? Maybe "open ourselves to the undoing of our limited imagination, ask the Spirit of God to help us embrace redemption, and return to our daily tasks enacting glimpses of the radical new reign of God."⁴ A church needs to understand that God is always renewing and restoring and that sometimes those changes are painful. Change can be bearable though because God is the author of change. A church that remains stuck in the comfort and familiarity of status-quo is not a church open to the new realities God shows them.

So, even though a church might be reluctant to accept change that is difficult, and challenging God accompanies us, and the spirit enables us. Life in community is never easy; I like to say that people are weird and that is how God created us. Before Jesus left his disciples, he promised a helper so their work would not be so burdensome. We have the same helper or advocate for us as individuals and as a church – the spirit whose fruit is love. Everything we do must be guided by love for God and love for others – love as Jesus loved.

One more thing, the keys to the prophetic ministry of both Elijah and Elisha – other prophets for that matter were, speaking truth to power, performing miracles, risking violent confrontation, overcoming moments of self-doubt, and discerning the voice of God. That last one is probably the most important. How can we be sure the cause to which we are driven is God's Spirit and not from our own desire or ego? How can the Holy Spirit be distinguished

⁴ C. Melissa Snarr. "Sunday between June 26 & July 2 inclusive. 2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14 and 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21 – Connecting the Reading with the World." *Connections, Year C, Vol. 3*. eds. Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2019. Print.

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from our human spirit? That is where discernment comes in and that is where Paul's "fruits of the Spirit" enter the picture. If one's so-called "Spirit-led" activity ends in needless enmity, strife, jealousy, and dissension, then it is a safe bet that the Spirit of God has had nothing to do with it. Don't blame the Spirit for the horrible things' humanity tends to do to humanity.

When change brings fear and anguish to our hearts allow the Spirit to guide you according to God's will. When we call on God's power for strength and courage the journey of change is much more bearable.