

## Scripture

### 2 Kings 2:1-12

2 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 Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. 3 The company of prophets[a] who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

4 Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. 5 The company of prophets[b] who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. 7 Fifty men of the company of prophets[c] also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8 Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

9 When they had 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." 10 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." 11 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. 12 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.

### Mark 9:2-9

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one[a] on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,[b] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved;[c] listen to him!" 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

### Sermon:

On Transfiguration Sunday we usually talk about one of the gospel texts that describe the episode of Jesus on the mountaintop with three of his disciples. It's a familiar scene to most of us. One day, Jesus along with Peter, James, and John, climbed a high mountain. Once at the top, Jesus' clothes became dazzlingly white and in the brightness Moses and Elijah appeared along with Jesus. Peter stammered out an awkward comment, and then the voice of God came from the heavens, saying about Jesus 'This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him!'

The Transfiguration of Jesus is all about identity and authority. Everything in this story testifies to who Jesus is, and commands that respect be paid to him. You have likely heard a few sermons over the years in which the role of Moses and Elijah are spelled out; Moses is the giver of the law, Elijah is the greatest of the prophets. Their presence on the mountaintop indicate they are in line with Jesus – the law and the prophets attest to Jesus' divine authority.

If there could be any doubt about Jesus' authenticity after the appearance of these two patriarchs, God himself spelled it out as clear as day. 'This is my son.' Identity. 'Listen to him.' Authority. In these passages Jesus has been revealed for who he truly is in as explicit a fashion as one could possibly hope. This is what the transfiguration is all about – revealing Jesus.

In the lectionary, along with the reading from Mark, is a reading from Second Kings that describes Elijah's ascension into heaven. Unlike almost everyone else on earth, then and now, Elijah didn't die. God collected him directly – he rode from earth to heaven in a chariot of fire.

Since Elijah was on the mountaintop with Jesus in the Transfiguration reading, it would seem that this account of Elijah's ascension has been included to bolster his testimony, so to speak. If Elijah served as a character witness to Jesus, then it would make sense to witness to the character of the character witness, and the ascension of Elijah does just that.

Jesus is the focus of the transfiguration story, and in it Elijah plays a supporting role. In the ascension story Elijah is the central character who is taken up to heaven, and we find Elisha as the supporting cast member. These are two different men, though their names are easy to confuse; Elijah was the prophet, Elisha his apprentice. In today's scripture selection Elisha plays second fiddle Elijah who plays second fiddle to Jesus, but young Elisha is the one I'd like to focus on.

Elisha went through his own transfiguration during Elijah's ascension into heaven. While Elisha did not become shiny that we know of, the figure of Elisha at the end of the story is not the same as the figure of Elisha at the beginning. Elisha has been transfigured. I'll use the word transformed in this sermon when I speak about Elisha, not because it's more accurate, but just so as not to confuse him with Jesus or equate him with Jesus. So just for today, to keep things simple, Jesus was transfigured and Elisha was transformed.

The transfiguration of Jesus was an event that filled the witnesses with awe and fear – it was an amazing event to be sure – but much of it was passive, in the sense that Jesus was transfigured – or revealed – and the disciples merely watched.

In watching they learned some profound things about who Jesus was, but it didn't seem to change them very much. As we read further in Mark we find the disciples continuing to stumble and bumble, failing to pray, arguing over who will be greatest in heaven, and eventually abandoning Jesus altogether.

In the transformation of Elisha there is also the appearance of a miracle, but also we see certain steps of transformation that take place both externally and internally that can teach us a great deal. I don't expect to ever 'light up' as Jesus did, and if one day I do, it will be a spirit-led event entirely outside of my control, but I can presume that in following the steps outlined in Elisha's journey of transformation that I could see transformation and blessing in my own life.

Elisha's transformation began with a journey, as transformations often do. It's not that we can't be transformed sitting at home – it can happen – but change requires change, we have to break our routine. The journey brings us into contact with new environments and people; it takes us out of our comfort zone, exposes us to hardship, and stretches us in unexpected ways. We have to expand and cross boundaries, both internal and external.

That isn't to say that we cannot be transformed without leaving our houses; it is possible, but it would have to involve those same elements as the journey: breaking routine, exposure to new people and ideas, a push into uncomfortable territory, hardship, and crossing boundaries. Both the at-home journey and the physical journey require intentionality on our part. We shouldn't expect transformation to find us one evening in front of the tv; we have to seek it out, we have to go on a quest.

Elisha's quest, at least this chapter of it, began in Gilgal in the territory of Samaria. The journey is almost derailed right from the beginning as Elijah said to his young apprentice 'The Lord has called me to Bethel, you wait here.'

In our bible there is always a deeper significance to names, and Bethel is no exception. Beth means place or house, and el means God – remember Samu-el and El-I a few weeks back. Bethel is the house of God. It was in Bethel that Abram built an altar, and Jacob saw the ladder to heaven covered in angels. It was a place to go and seek the counsel of God in the time of the Judges, and was one of the two major places of worship when the kingdom split into north and south.

Knowing this, this scene at the beginning of Elisha's quest comes across a little differently. What Elisha heard Elijah say was 'I'm going to God's house, you wait here.' Is it any wonder then, that he replied saying 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' And so the journey began.

As the two approached Bethel, the house of God, a company of prophets came out and pulled Elisha aside. Nodding to Elijah they said 'You know God's going to take him away from you today, don't you?'

This seems to be a very curious thing to do. I don't see anywhere in the text that anyone thought to warn Elijah that this would be his last day on earth, it would seem that instead people were murmuring behind his back.

It appears that human nature hasn't changed much in three thousand years. They may have couched their words in the language of concern, but it would seem that their real concerns were not about Elijah, but more about what would happen once the chief prophet was gone. They were whispering about succession and power – conspiring – breathing together, huddled in a small knot.

To his credit, Elisha replied 'Yes, I know he's leaving. Now be quiet.' The apprentice shows fidelity to his master and demonstrates wise leadership in immediately squashing the discussion. He does not engage in speculation, he doesn't stake his claim as Elijah's apprentice – he decisively shuts down the conversation. Elisha is doing well in this journey, so far.

They don't spend much time in Bethel before Elijah turned to his apprentice and said 'God is calling me to Jericho, you stay here.'

Jericho was the strategic entry point from Transjordan into Judah. As the ragtag nation of Israel wandered from the desert into the promised land the first city they came across was Jericho which was the strongest fortress in Caanan. Jericho was their first battle and their first view of how easily God would overturn their enemies.

This was where Elijah was headed, and again he told his apprentice to stay. Elijah replied as he did in Gilgal 'As long as the Lord lives, and as long as you live, I will never leave you.' In Jericho Elisha encounters another group of prophets who murmur and whisper as the first group did, and Elisha promptly shut them down as he did in Bethel.

The scene plays out a third time as Elijah is called to the Jordan river – a symbolic boundary between Israel's promised land and the Gentile nations. Elisha is told to stay, and again states that he will follow Elijah, as long as he lives.

Certainly in Elisha's persistent following we sense echoes of Ruth who was faithful to her mother-in-law no matter what. There are also similarities with Jacob, who wrestled with the angel back in Bethel, where Elisha was earlier in the day. It is unclear though, whether Elisha was following Elijah to the very end out of love and respect for his master, or if he, like Jacob, was seeking a blessing.

When they reached the river, Elijah took off his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it, parting the waters to allow them to cross, followed by a crowd of prophets from Jericho who followed at a distance.

Once across, Elijah offered to grant a final request to Elisha, and so Elisha asked for a double share of his spirit. It seems a bit of a cryptic request, but according to the custom of the time, when a father died and his estate was split the eldest son inherited a double portion than his younger brothers. It would seem then that Elisha was asking to be recognized as the first son – to be Elijah's heir and successor.

Elijah wisely left this decision up to God and they continued to walk and talk until a chariot and team of horses made of fire swept Elijah up, as his cloak fell back to the earth.

Now is a good time to recap and highlight the important points.

1. Elisha walked with Elijah. Three times he was offered rest, and three times he chose to continue his journey. Elisha was intentional; Elisha persevered. Discipleship is not just about listening to the lessons and then going home; discipleship requires a complete commitment between the teacher and pupil and a full immersion in each other's lives.

You'll notice that the walk took Elisha from the wilderness of Samaria to God's house, then to Caanan's former stronghold, the border river, then beyond. This is a journey that we all take: wilderness, God's house, the places of the world that used to be intimidating, and then into parts unknown.

It is important to note that Elijah's ascension and Elisha's moment of transformation take place across the Jordan, in an unnamed place. Transformations don't necessarily take place in A-list destinations, but more frequently they occur in the non-descript places and in the humdrum of ordinary time. You don't need to go to the Land of the Holy One, you can be transformed right here in Simcoe.

So, Elisha was a faithful follower of Elijah. The second point is that Elisha chose to follow God, not men. We see this when he silenced the murmuring prophets. This was his golden opportunity to establish his position as the new Elijah - trade some favours, make some deals. Instead, he commanded silence.

This silence was not just a lack of speaking. As Elijah's disciple, who walked with him wherever he went, Elisha would have been very familiar with his master's encounter with God on the mountaintop. That was the time that there was a great wind that split the rock, but God was not in the wind. There followed an earthquake, fire, and finally....sheer silence. And out of that silence God spoke.

When Elisha commanded silence from the prophets he wasn't just telling them to shut up. He was making space to listen for God's voice.

The third thing that Elisha did was to dare to pick up Elijah's mantle where it had fallen. That takes courage. Fifty prophets were watching him, waiting for him to fail. Elisha had to pick up the cloak, walk back to the Jordan river, strike the water and pray to God that something would happen.

Did you notice that he didn't pray to 'my God,' but instead he called upon the God of Elijah? He is still very unsure of himself; he is acting on pure faith and adrenaline.

God was with Elisha on that day, and every day after that. Elisha continued his journey of transformation, returning from across the Jordan back to Jericho, then to Bethel, and on into the wilderness. He went out as an apprentice. He returned as a miracle-working prophet of God. Elisha was transformed – he was transfigured in three steps that we can learn from.

Find somebody of faith whose life is worth imitating and follow them.

Listen for the voice of God over the voice of other people.

When the moment is right, dare to act and collect your inheritance as a child of God.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.