

Bravely Stepping Into a New World
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Luke 9:51-62
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Some of my Favorite, most nostalgic memories, from my childhood were my summer breaks because it was my annual tradition to travel to Phoenix Arizona and spend the summer with my grandparents and cousins. These childhood memories are some of the most loved filled and cherished memories of my life. I was incredibly close to my grandparents. The beauty of Grandparents is that they love you unconditionally and never had to discipline you like your parents and this was the only time each year that I saw my cousins. During those summer months, my days were full of swimming in my grandparents pool, hosting tea parties for my grandmother, dressing up in party clothes and choreographing dances to whatever new hit was out by Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, or Amy Grant... It was a wonderful time!! The worst part, the absolute WORST part of the summer was the end of it, when the looming END came, and I would have to say Goodbye, goodbye to fun in the sun, goodbye to my cousins and grandparents, goodbye to tea parties, and silliness... I hated saying goodbye...

Saying Goodbye is hard, I remember when the end of the summer began to draw near I would avoid thinking about it, and then as we were packing our bags to travel back to our perspective homes, a huge lump would begin to form in my throat, and then as we would travel in the car to the airport the tears would prickle my eyes, and even though we had had so much fun, and even though next summer would most likely be the same, I would stand in the airport with tears streaming down my face, this was true grief (for a third grader). My family still teases me about being terrible at saying Goodbye. I always cry at the end of any visit.

Ugh! Goodbyes are horrible. To say goodbye is let go of the present, to accept that tomorrow will not look like today, and to accept (sometimes not so willingly) the change that is before you. And I have never been good at it. To my horrible disappointment, I learned as an emerging adult that the older I become, Goodbyes are just more frequent. Goodbye to childhood, schools, jobs, cities, friends, and goodbye to both of my grandparents who have recently passed away; it was both a privilege and heartbreak to sit with my beloved cousins at the bedside of both my grandmother and grandfather as they transitioned from this life to the next.

I've been thinking recently about a forced Goodbye that I'm still coming to terms with. I have been thinking about that week in March 2020, the week when all of our lives changed dramatically. The NBA cancelled games, March Madness was cancelled, restaurants shut down, borders were closed. And we all retreated into our homes learning how to convert our lives to the virtual world; Zoom meetings, Zoom hangouts, Zoom parties, Zoom Church. The week the

World Health Organization declared we were living through a global pandemic, and in an instant life was changed forever.

In today's Old Testament Passage, we find ourselves back in the book of 2 Kings with the prophets Elijah and Elisha (a couple of weeks ago I preached on the text where Elisha healed Naaman, a commander of the enemy's army) and today's story does not disappoint. This text has everything - magical river crossings, an ascension to heaven, and chariots made out of fire, which at first glance this story feels completely unrelatable. BUT with a closer look we actually find a story that is not all that unfamiliar. The story is about Elijah, the older the prophet discerning it is time to retire and passing on his mission and work to his protégé, the younger prophet Elisha. This story is essentially about saying goodbye.

For many years Elijah had worked alone as a prophet of Israel, but was joined by Elisha after a stressful anxiety producing stand against the king and queen of Israel (King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and Elijah had a very volatile relationship) and God sent Elisha to Elijah to be a companion in Elijah's work as a prophet but also as a promise that Elijah's work would be continued for many years following Elijah's life.

And so in our reading today, Elijah has discerned that it is time for him to retire, that his work as a prophet has come to an end and he can pass "the job" on to Elisha. Elijah discerns that God is ready to take him to heaven.

Elijah attempts to send Elisha away from him, maybe because saying goodbye is hard, maybe trusting another person to take on his work in the world was difficult, or maybe he is trying to protect Elisha, but multiple times Elijah tells Elisha to leave and multiple times Elisha responds NO, absolutely not. Elisha says "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." I think that Elisha knows what is about to happen and he is NOT ready for it. Elisha stubbornly holds on/ clings to Elijah refusing to let go, and you can almost hear him say, I AM NOT READY TO DO ALL THIS ON MY OWN!!! I need you stay with me, I don't want it to change. You see even prophets who are able to call down fire from heaven, are reluctant to change up their ways of doing things.

And so Elijah cannot shake Elisha. The two men continue on a journey together and eventually come to the sacred Jordan river, a place that often symbolizes transformation. Elijah strikes the water of the Jordan River with his Mantle (which another word for this is coat) and the Jordan river parts and the two men are able to cross over to the other side.

One Commentator I came across theorizes that in this particular narrative, the walking across the Jordan river, is a literary tool symbolizing the veil between the world of the living and the world of the dead. "The other side" of the Jordan river in this particular story is a magical place, where reality is slightly different. Elisha is so stubbornly clinging to Elijah, and so unwilling to say goodbye that he Journeys with his teacher and friend to the *other side*. Elisha is so reluctant to say goodbye, that he almost goes with Elijah to heaven.

But Elijah will not let that happen. Elijah knows that it is important for the work of God to continue and that Elisha must return back to the other side of the Jordan river. Elijah asks, what can I do for you before I leave... Elijah is saying you have avoided the truth for long enough, but avoiding doesn't make it any less real. And so Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. To our modern ears this request doesn't make sense, but a double portion was typically the inheritance of the eldest son. Elijah responds to Elisha request saying that he will inherit the double portion, If Elisha watches Elijah leave. Elijah is saying If you acknowledge that I have gone- If you SAY GOODBYE, if you let go of the past then you will have your inheritance. Then, as the two men continue walking through the magical land of the "other side" a chariot of horses made up of fire separate the two men, and now it is no longer possible for Elisha to hold onto the Elijah. Elisha cannot fight off horse of Fire! Elijah is encompassed by the mighty whirlwind of God and is taken to heaven, and Elisha is left behind watching and grieving as Elijah is taken away. In his grief Elisha notices that Elijah's coat/Mantle was left behind and so he puts the coat on and journeys back to the Jordan River (this details struck me because after the death of each of my grandparents I went to their closet and wrapped myself in one of their coziest sweaters- it was a way to feel close to them). At the Jordan river, the crossing point into this new world, Elisha strikes the Jordan River with the coat and the waters part for him to cross back over.

One Commentor states:

"Where is God amidst the turbulence of change and transition? This remarkable story draws us into the in-between space of profound change and show us ways to find our way through it. This story illustrates that continuity of past and future is part of the transition. The last miraculous work of Elijah becomes the first miraculous work of Elisha; Elijah strikes the water before being taken up, and Elisha does the same afterward. The mantle itself symbolizes the continuity of God's work in what has been and what will follow.

Elisha's world has now changed, but he steps bravely into this new world standing on the shoulders of the work and ministry of Elijah.

In March 2020 I was living in Tacoma Washington and had been working tirelessly to plant a congregation on the inside of a women's prison, and at that time the church plant was tremendously successful; we had approximately 150 members worshipping together every Saturday evening along with weekly programming, and to be frank, it was all going super well and I was really excited about the future of this church plant. Up until that week I had been pouring all of my energy and creativity into the work of creating this new budding worshipping community. But God had other plans. Because Saturday March 7th 2020 was the last time Crawford and I would lead worship together at Hagar's Community Church; it was the last time that Worshipping community would gather as one congregation. And it was in fact the last time Crawford would see or interact with any member of the congregation again. When we walked to our cars on March 7th, 2020 we had no idea that we had just said goodbye. I was eventually allowed back into the prison during the pandemic. But In truth that church

experience was never the same again. I learned that week that God truly does give and take away and we have little to no control on the future. It is all in God's sovereignty.

Eventually the prison began to create a new normal. Worship services were allowed, but only in a "socially distanced" capacity. Folks could only worship with people from their living unit. Worship services had a maximum capacity of fifteen people. Week after week, my congregants and I would meet for worship, patiently waiting for things to return to "normal." The weeks turned to months, and the months turned to a year and a half. One day I realized that I had pastored Hagar's longer in the COVID wait-and-see world than I had in non-COVID times. I began to wonder if what I was patiently waiting for—a return to what had been—was even possible. I started to wonder, What if, instead of waiting for things to return to the way it was, I'm called to be present in the reality I had been given? I was being invited to say HELLO to a world that had changed and I was also being called to pass the mantle – the leadership of Hagar's Community Church- on to another pastor. God had new plans for me at Lewinsville Presbyterian Church. It was time for me to say both Goodbye and Hello, and to step bravely into this new world.

To be human is to live with constant change, new people, new things, new ideas, new technologies, new everything. Goodbyes happen all the time in life (sometimes we don't even realize it), and saying goodbye, dealing with grief and loss is in fact a constant part of life, and our goodbyes do not stand alone, but bring with them Hello's- so not only are we faced with acceptance of what we are losing, but simultaneously we are asked to accept the new reality of tomorrow.

As we all know, change is frightening, disconcerting. There is something within us that resists change or saying goodbye. Like Elisha we do not want to even think about it or talk about. We have an urge to avoid it. And since that fateful week in March 2020, it seems as though we are all riding a rollercoaster of accelerating transition. The ground beneath us keeps shifting, and we keep having to pivot to a new normal. A phrase I hear all the time "these are just such strange times we are living in." We are all in the process of catching up to the new world we have found ourselves living in. And the witness of this story is that Change is meaningful and bearable because God is the author of Change. God's whirlwind blows away every love, every security, every safety- our changeless God pushes ceaseless change on our world and on each of us. It has never been God's plan for things to stay the same, the world is constantly moving and changing, and the spirit of God is continually forming and reforming us. It is a Presbyterian fact that God is forming and reforming the church! And just as Elisha is called to continue the ministry of God in that ever-changing world, so are we.

And, it is important to realize that Grief is a part of accepting the future. Grief is hard- and grief is not an easy journey. And so many of us gathered here today are probably grieving in some sort of way: Loss of a beloved family member or spouse, loss of a job, or moving on to a new job, Loss of friends, Loss of routines. Handing over your work to another person (I know that can be a difficult process) these are all some of the hardest parts of our lives, and we are living through a time where so many people in this world are grieving. If you are grieving,

please know that your church family is here for you- please feel free to reach out to me or others on staff- the journey of grief is real and I hope no one feels alone in their grief. Grief is most often associated as an emotion we experience the death of a friend or loved one- but it has been my experience that we sometime need to grieve our unmet expectations.

(Story about Crawford and I in the first year of Marriage- I had to grieve my expectations around eating dinner together)

- First year of Marriage Crawford and I were navigating what it meant to merge our lives
- We started having a repetitive disagreement about dinner
- My family ate dinner together every night/Crawford's family did not have the same ritual
- This was conflict that had no right or wrong answer- but I had to allow myself to grieve that my expectation of eating dinner together every night would not be met... and I'm serious... I had to journal and cry to work through this expectation not being met.
- But what I learned from this experience was that after I grieved and let go of my expectation... was that I could then enjoy the benefits of my new reality
- there was a certain freedom and whimsy that came from having a more open schedule around the dinner hour.
- I can also tell you that now we actually do eat dinner together every night, but that developed over time, and I'm less reactive when we need to make other plans.

The truth is that we are all called to say goodbye to the past, to accept the past for what it is beautiful and flawed, but we are not called to get so wrapped up in what was, that we are not able to move forward in the world that we are currently living in.

The gospel reading for today, at first and even second glance seems harsh. Jesus is instructing people to not go and bury their family members, and not to say goodbye to brothers and sisters. Jesus is saying quite sternly that to be a part of the kingdom of God, is to look forward. In our gospel reading we are told that Jesus "has set his face towards Jerusalem" meaning that Jesus has begun his descent towards the cross.. And his instruction is harsh because he is saying the call to follow me is not easy, the end of this road is death on a cross. But Jesus is also instructing us that we cannot hold onto the past with such intensity that we are unable to hear God's call to let go, say goodbye, and step bravely into the unknown future. Like Elisha today we are called to let go accept the future, we are called to listen to the words of Jesus and let go of the past and keep on proclaiming the kingdom of God. This isn't easy work, but the promise is that it is God's work, and that God is with us through the process. Please join me in a prayer - Gracious God, as we step bravely into this new world give us the trust and knowledge that you are with us each step of the way, that we are free to grieve all that we have lost, but that we are called to meet you in the present continuing to share your love with all we encounter.
Amen.