

St Mark's Lutheran Church
Transfiguration
2 Kings 2:1-12
Learning from the master

Introduction

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes reading the Bible is like doing a dot-to-dot drawing and being able to connect the right people to the right places and the right events helps us to see the overall picture more clearly.

Today's readings are a bit like that.

We hear about Elijah and Elisha and their travels. We hear about Jesus and the disciples and the Transfiguration. But it may not be immediately obvious how these things connect to one another. So we are going to try to connect a few dots today. Although I should mention that I am not a very good artist and even my dot-to-dot drawings don't always end up looking like they should, but hopefully that won't be the case today!

Elijah and Elisha

Firstly, Elijah and Elisha, these two great Old Testament prophets, that can be very hard to distinguish. Both proclaimed God's word in Israel about 800 years before Christ, after Israel had settled in the Promised Land and before it went into exile. Elijah came first chronologically, which is not hard to remember, because his name comes first alphabetically as well.

Elijah was very much the mentor, the leader, teacher and older of the two. He is well known for his interaction with the widow of Zarephath, for defeating the prophets of Baal and for hearing God's voice in a gentle whisper in the wilderness. He spent a lot of time in the wilderness. He was something of a lone wolf and comparisons are often made between him and John the Baptist, not least by Jesus himself.

Elisha came second. He was called and mentored by Elijah. He became known as the one who healed the waters of Israel, who healed the great soldier Naaman and who prepared Israel for exile and for the task of one day rebuilding its cities on a firm foundation. He is sometimes compared to Jesus because of the healing, restoring nature of his ministry.

Today we heard that *'When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to*

Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. Three times, Elijah tries to shake Elisha off and three times he commits himself by oath to remain at his mentor’s side.

Why does Elijah want to take the last leg of his journey alone? We are not told. Does he have unfinished business to attend to in Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho? Does he feel like, at this point, he has given Elisha everything he has to give? Three times, Elijah tries to go it alone and three times Elisha yes, ‘No, I’m coming with you,’ like a puppy yapping at his heels.

I get the feeling that Elisha wanted to see this through to the end. He cared about his mentor. He valued everything he had taught him. He had seen him in life and now he wanted to see and learn from him in his final days on earth as well. There is something to be said for hanging in there, staying faithful, committed, to the very end.

Elijah has been his master and mentor and friend. Elisha has grown up into his prophetic calling by observing and living side by side with him. As Christian people, in this wonderful, intergenerational, community we call the church, we have an opportunity to observe and live side by side, with those who have gone before us in the faith and those who are coming after us; to see what God wants us to grow up into and to be role models for our young people of what Christian maturity looks like. They won’t find it online; not in the same way anyway. It comes through first-hand, lived experience and Elisha was going to savour every last moment of it.

Elijah and his spirit

Elijah and his spirit. Eventually we do get an insight into why Elisha is so eager to stay at his master’s side. ‘When they had crossed,’ we read, ‘Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”’ “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied. The firstborn son in those days typically received a double portion or the family inheritance, so Elisha is asking to be treated like Elijah’s heir, his successor. He literally asks for a double mouthful, a double helping, of his spirit.

A person’s spirit is their breath, their life-force, their being. So Elisha becomes like Elijah in a very deep way, a man after his own heart, we might say. He takes up his mantle, his cloak, his calling, which is actually where that saying comes from. Elijah acknowledges that a spirit is a difficult thing to give but that if Elisha sees him depart then it will be his.

To try and connect a few more dots here, if we jump forward into the New Testament, we see Jesus living side by side with his disciples, teaching and instructing them, before his departure. And one of his last gifts he gives to them is his spirit, his Holy Spirit. He breathes on them. He says, 'Peace be with you.' He says, 'If you forgive anyone sins, they are forgiven.' He imparts something of his being, his life-force to them, so they can take up his mantle and continue his work on earth.

We are beneficiaries of that work. We have received that Spirit in baptism. We have been called to take up his mantle in the world. Just as Elisha hung in there long enough to see his master ascend with chariots of fire, so Jesus' disciples accompanied him in the first stage of his ascension, which we call his Transfiguration. At the Transfiguration Jesus has one foot on earth and one in heaven.

Elijah and his Lord

There we see that Elijah is not just the master but that he too has a master, a Lord. What was Elijah doing there at the Transfiguration? Why was he part of the picture; part of the vision? Well, we are told he and Moses were *talking with Jesus*. Wouldn't you love to hear that conversation? They were talking with Jesus, because the law, which Moses represents and the prophets, whom Elijah represents, speak to us about Christ. They prepare us for Christ. They till the ground of our hearts for Christ. They show us our need for Christ. We don't Christ apart from them.

Marcion, in the early church, wanted to do away with Moses and Elijah and the Old Testament and this wrathful Hebrew God. In the end the church did away with him; his teachings at least! You can't have one without the other. The Old sheds light on the New and the New on the Old. Elijah talks to Jesus. But... you do have to hang in there until the end. You do have to connect the final dots.

At the end of the Transfiguration, we don't hear of horses and chariots, but we here this. *Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.* The final word, the final picture, the final vision, the final image is that of our Lord and master Jesus Christ.

He is ours and we are his and the picture of our lives doesn't make sense without him. They are just a jumble of people and places and events, of disconnected dots. '*Listen to him,*' God says, as he connects them, as he puts you and holds you together. '*Listen to him,*' as he breathes his Spirit you

and forgives your sins. *'Listen to him,'* as he feeds you with his body and blood, as he calls you to follow him, to Jerusalem, to the cross, to the empty grave and one day to be with him in heaven.