

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 8, Year C (track 1)

First Reading

2 Kings 2:1–2, 6-14

(Omitted verses have been included in this and the next text in italics.)

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. And Elijah said to Elisha, "Please 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.

And the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?" And he said, "Yes, I know it; keep quiet."

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, please 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. The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know it; keep quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Please 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. Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me." And he said, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so." And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw him no more.

Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. And he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. (ESV)

Second Reading

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 9:51–62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our first reading today is no doubt chosen in part because of the way that it parallels (very roughly) the Gospel text. That is, both Elijah and Jesus have set their faces towards their departures. Beyond that, though, there are few similarities.

What is significant in this week's passage from 2 Kings is the way that Elijah's mantle is passed on to his successor, Elisha. We have heard only briefly of Elisha before. In 1 Kings 19 (just after last week's reading) God instructed Elijah to anoint Elisha as prophet in his place. And he did. Then there is no mention of Elisha until this week's reading.

Through all of 1 Kings 20-22 and 2 Kings 1, Elisha is there, but we see or hear nothing of him. Still, he has been "anointed" to follow in Elijah's footsteps and he knows it. It must have been rather like David, who had been anointed as king of Israel years before he ascended the throne, only to go back to tending the sheep. There is a pattern here of anointing followed by a long period of preparation before assuming one's mantle.

I recall also Joseph, son of Isaac, whose dreams had placed a call on his life to save God's people from famine by bringing them to Egypt, but who had to spend years in servitude and prison before assuming his position.

It is like the call of the disciples, who spent years following Jesus and being prepared before they were given a portion of the Spirit that Jesus had and were given the mantle of presenting to the world the Gospel that Jesus had preached. (Not the double portion that Elisha received!)

Or like Paul, who was called on his way to Damascus, but spent fourteen years in preparation for the task God had sent before him. (Galatians 2:1)

What we see in this week's first reading and in many other biblical examples is the way that God places a calling on us long before we are ready to assume the office or purpose to which we've been called.

This reminds me of the way that I have felt on occasions in my own life, when I felt a strong call on my life but had to wait a long time before I was ready to take that next step into the mantle that had been

prepared for me. The only word for it would be “impatience.” I knew I had a call when I went to talk to the assistant to the rector when I was sixteen, but I was told then to wait, and that command to wait was repeated to me when I was in college, and once or twice after that. Then, when I made my Cursillo I realized that there was so much more to “going to church” than I’d ever realized, and I wanted everyone around me to know what I knew. I can’t help thinking that I was probably pretty obnoxious about the whole thing at first. But I wasn’t ready to do what I’d been called to do. I finally went on to seminary and thought “Now I’m ready!” but I wasn’t. Sometimes I still pray for those who had to put up with me in my first years of ministry. I had to go through a time of deep pain in ministry wherein my prayer became “God, grind me to dust if You must, but do whatever You need to do to remake me!” It wasn’t until after that time that I was able to receive the gifts God had intended for me from the first moment I knew I was called. It took Elisha a few years. Somewhat longer for Joseph. Fourteen for Paul. Me? It took more than 20.

The point is patience, steadfastness. If you have a fire in your bones, but you’re not seeing God open the doors to allow you to walk out the calling that is on your life, there is a good chance that you aren’t ready yet. Walk the walk, unseen and unheard like Elisha and wait patiently for your time. It will come.

Second Reading

There are two things that I’d like to point out about this week’s reading from Galatians, the first is this bit: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

It sounds as though Paul is saying that those who do those things won’t get into heaven when they die. He’s not. He’s simply not. What he’s saying is that those behaviors and the Kingdom of God can’t exist in the same space, in us, simultaneously. And they can’t. But for Paul, inheriting the Kingdom of God is a present reality, not some future pie in the sky heaven. (Romans 14:17, 1 Corinthians 4:20) Paul’s desire isn’t to see us fly off to heaven at the moment of our deaths, but to see us enter into Kingdom reality in the present, to enjoy “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” (Romans 14) and “power.” (1 Corinthians) It’s only because Christianity has been distorted into a religion of future reward in heaven that we read Paul the way we do, and make this passage in Galatians into a list of those who won’t be admitted.

Okay, the other thing is this. I am utterly convinced that this sentence in our reading has been mis-translated, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” I remember a time when I was advised to memorize that list of the “fruits of the Spirit.” But that’s not a list of the fruits of the Spirit.

It’s a small thing, but there should be a period after “love.” Then capitalize joy and start a new sentence. It’s quite simple, but when Paul speaks of fruit, he speaks in the singular. The noun in Greek is singular. The verb is singular. There is one fruit of the Spirit. Love. From love flow all those other things, but they aren’t the fruit of the Spirit. They are the result of love. Yes, in a sort of secondary fashion they all flow from the Spirit, but by translating it the way we do, we lose Paul’s emphasis on the primacy of love. “So now, faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.” All of those other things really are secondary. And the way we find love? Seek the Spirit. I can’t make myself love as I want to love. But I can open myself to the Holy Spirit and let the love that God has for me and for others indwell me.

Want “ joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?” Seek love. Want the kind of love that brings those things? Seek the Holy Spirit.

Gospel Text

Our text this week begins with Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem. Luke 9:51 begins the long procession of Jesus to the Cross. And in these opening verses we see Jesus saying hard things to those who would follow Him. There will follow a good many more comforting words, but initially it seems that Jesus is painfully aware of what it will cost those who choose to take up His mantle after His death.

The words are hard to hear because they challenge us so, but that doesn’t mean that we must read them in a “hard” voice. I find it helpful, even necessary to keep in mind the love that Jesus had for each of the people to whom He speaks. Try reading these words again, but hear the pain that Jesus feels for the ones of whom He’s asking these things,

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

“Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Jesus knows what living into His own calling will cost Him, and He knows what it will cost those who come after Him. He isn't berating these folks, He's warning them. He's warning us. The Kingdom is worth it, (Remember it's not some future heaven in the clouds but a present reality.) but the “home” we thought we needed will no longer matter so much. Jesus will be our place of safety. We will proclaim the Kingdom in ways that confuse those who cannot see beyond their grief, those who “bury the dead.” We will find our eyes constantly drawn to the future into which God is drawing us, even to the point of leaving behind those who aren't ready to walk with us yet.

Is it any wonder that Jesus says that those who follow Him will “take up their crosses daily?”