

So Now What?

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2 Kings 2.1-12

Transfiguration isn't a word that's a normal part of our vocabulary, except, as one writer reminded me, if you are a Harry Potter fan. (In case you haven't read the book series, Harry and his friends have to take a transfiguration class where they learn the complex, dangerous magic of turning one object into another.) Yet once every church year, we pull that word off of our theological vocabulary shelf, dust it off, and open its pages to discover the story inside.

When we do, we find the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, where his appearance changes dramatically, his garments turn dazzling white, and the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah appear out of nowhere. The three of them begin to have a conversation – the contents of which remain a mystery.

It makes me wonder if that verbal exchange might have included reflections on the stories behind this story – vivid tales that are transfiguration stories in their own right – the story of Moses, and the story of Elijah and his protégé Elisha, which we heard in today's Old Testament lesson from 2 Kings.

The very first sentence of the text Martha read gives an unmistakable clue that this is not going to be any ordinary day: "Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind..." Cue the background music...something big is about to happen.

Perhaps that's not surprising, given that Elijah had a flair for the dramatic during his illustrious prophetic career. He was a power broker, in a religious sense, speaking the word of God to Israel's king and people of his day. He did so dramatically, brashly, sometimes even violently, in ways that I confess I do not understand; the chasm across time, space, and culture is too great.

According to the Scripture story, Elijah did it with miracles, saving a starving widow and her son. He did it with fire, arranging a contest between the God of Israel and the Canaanite god Baal. He did it with a sword, brutally slaughtering Baal's defeated prophets. And he did it by confronting the competing powers and authorities of his day, sometimes in loathsome fashion. Like every other prophet before him, and every other prophet since him, he was far from perfect, failing to exercise justice and compassion and sometimes even placing ideology over relationship just as we often do.

Even so, in the tradition of Israel, Elijah is a great prophet – one of the greatest, virtually on par with that other imperfect prophet who appeared up on Transfiguration Mountain with Jesus. Like Moses, Elijah is a giant in the prophetic business. And now the text hints that his tenure is about to end with a dramatic flourish that seems to fit his outsized personality. To be sure, it will shake up the religious landscape.

The end of an era is certainly unsettling when there's no heir apparent to take the lead. Think Jon Stewart's announcement this week that after 17 years, he's leaving The Daily Show. Now what? Who can possibly fill his shoes with the same amount of snark, smirks, and dagger-like truth-telling? Or imagine the someday when Warren Buffett leaves Berkshire Hathaway. Who can possibly fill the shoes of the Oracle of Omaha, investors everywhere would want to know.

Yet even when there is a named successor; even when the next generation of leadership has already been tapped, there is still that same sense of “what will happen now?” Remember when Steve Jobs announced his resignation from Apple as his health declined? Even as the company simultaneously announced someone with a proven track record as new CEO, certainly there was underlying question: how would the future would play out? I wonder if Cook and Jobs had conversations about that. I wonder how Cook observed Jobs, what he learned from him – what he should do, and what he shouldn’t. I wonder what their working relationship was like as they went through that transition. Was it difficult? Was it emotional? Was it poignant, like the relationship revealed between Elijah and Elisha and the company of prophets on their journey of succession?

As they navigate the way from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho, and ultimately across the Jordan River, I wonder if Elisha thinks he will have to take on Elijah’s larger-than-life persona – speak like him, turn a phrase like him, call down fire from heaven like him. I even wonder if he wishes he had more time with him, because each time Elijah asks Elisha to stay behind, each time Elisha devotedly, plaintively, even stubbornly says, “No, I’m not leaving you.”

And twice, the local company of prophets questions Elisha about Elijah’s imminent departure. And twice he answers, “Yes, I know; be silent,” which to my ears sounds like “I know; don’t remind me.” By the third time the company of prophets comes around, there’s nothing more to be said. Change is on the way, and everybody knows it. Elijah knows. Elisha knows. The company of prophets knows. So now what?

We have those “so now what” moments in our lives of faith and ministry. We have them when the one at whose feet we learned to sing “Jesus loves me” – the one who was always there for us and interpreted God’s far-reaching love for us – reaches his or her life’s end. We have them when a pillar of the faith community moves on to another place. We have them when the traditions and institutions we’ve always counted on cease to be. We have them when the prophetic voices of the past go silent.

These are simultaneously moments of crisis **and** possibility. They are crises because the danger exists that no prophetic heir will step forward, that no one will take a risk to bear a word of God. **And** they are also moments of transcendent possibility, where the potential for transformation, and dare I say, transfiguration, is at its greatest.

MaryAnn McKibben Dana suggests that the latter is what happened to Elisha – that he was transfigured by his journey as he tenaciously clung to his mentor and teacher. And when Elijah gave him one more chance to ask something of him, Elisha went for the “big ask” and requested a double share of his spirit, a share that would affirm his legitimacy as heir to the prophetic call. And Elijah responds that if Elisha will keep watching as he ascends to heaven, he would indeed inherit a double share.

I hear a lot of good news for us in this story. Foremost, perhaps, is what W. Dennis Tucker, Jr. suggests - that the prophetic voice of God doesn’t end with the death or ascension of one particular person, but it’s available for all who choose to carry on that tradition. God’s ministry will go on.

I also hear the good news that Elisha’s inheritance can be ours. I hear the possibility of our own transfiguration as we take on the prophetic role. David Lose eloquently challenges popular notions that a prophet stands at a distance to predict the future or call upon God’s judgment. Rather, he reframes the task this way: “To be a prophet is to enter deeply into the realities and relationships of the people to whom [we] are sent...the prophet’s message is so potent, bof it is driven by the anguish of witnessing the disparity between the grand desire of God for God’s

people and the paucity and poverty of the reality God's people has been willing to accept...[and] to be a prophet is to be completely vulnerable, absolutely dependent on God's word and mercy." That's the hard thing, and it's also the best news of all. We do not go it alone.

We need that good news as we discern our calling for this time and place in history. We need it, for theologian Douglas John Hall reminds us that discerning the nature of "the present time" is our inheritance from the prophetic faith of Israel: "Always, the prophet had to decide: to think this and not that, and to act accordingly...Nothing can or will alleviate the agony of discernment for the disciple community. Though it will sometimes be more excruciating and sometimes less, it will never pass from the valley of decision to the mountaintop of certitude."¹

We do not go it alone. In God's grace and mercy, just as Elijah and Elisha and the whole company of prophets formed a community that upheld one another, so God has given us the gift of community in which to discern our prophetic witness. As Elijah and Elisha traveled from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the banks of the Jordan and across the river, they kept walking and talking. Talking and walking – together. What a great practice for us to embrace – to walk and talk together as we discern the word of God that our world so desperately needs to hear and experience.

And in our walking and talking together, may we audaciously ask God to equip us with a double portion of God's spirit, holding fast to what we affirm in our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith, that "In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace."

It's in that realm that the promise and possibility of transfiguration lies. It really is good news. Amen.

¹ Hall, 132-133.