

“The First Step”

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*Scripture:* Luke 9:51-62, II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

What might we say of Elisha? *Poor* Elisha, perhaps? He went from place to place, faithfully—loyally—following his master, Elijah. Repeatedly he was told by his master and mentor, “Wait here,” and each time Elisha doggedly declared an unwavering devotion which would allow him to move forward with, rather than wait for, Elijah. The old prophet was bringing closure to his life, visiting and saying good-bye to a “company of prophets,” colleagues of sorts, in Bethel and Jericho, and Elisha wanted to go with him. Elisha, servant and successor-hopeful at this point was willing to follow, well, to wherever he might be led. The story contained in this text is one of suspense and waiting. *Suspense* because we are pretty sure that this journey of Elijah’s is leading to the end of his life, and so will eventually concludes with a dramatic scenario. We anticipate that somewhere, at some time, there will be an impending shift of power—some kind of transition—that will take place for Elisha and Elijah but we know neither when nor what. And *waiting* because that is precisely what Elisha must do. During Elisha’s internship with Elijah waiting had taken a variety of forms but it had never been about standing still at an outpost while Elijah went about his business. It had, to this point, been the important waiting for transformation of himself for the possibility of someday walking in the shoes of the old prophet. Now waiting, for Elisha, was about waiting for direction from the old prophet, waiting for what Elijah’s “end” would be like, waiting to discover his own role in the prophetic world/arena, and, now, at the end, waiting to see if he would be granted his request to succeed the old prophet, waiting to receive the authority of the mantle and waiting for the waters to part when, at last, he is given confirmation of his succession as prophet. In and among it all there is no guarantee of anything...only faith and loyalty and devotion on Elisha’s part. And, of course, waiting.

We are not good at waiting, you and I. We live in a time when impulse, spontaneity and immediate gratification often govern our decision making. We choose actions with the philosophy that because we can, we should...and not necessarily because we have considered God’s will or thought through the consequences. A recent book about life in an imperfect universe called, “A Tear at the Edge of Creation,” references a quote from 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, de Fontenelle. He concludes, “All philosophy is based upon two things only: curiosity and poor eyesight...the trouble is we want to know more than we can see.” And particularly when we are waiting for something we have only blurry vision about, our impatience wants to know NOW what is coming LATER...what the outcome will be. “Will I get married, get a job, get pregnant, get accepted to college, and get through this transition? The suspense is killing me,” we agonize...

I don’t imagine that Elisha was entirely patient either...that he did not grow tired of waiting. And yet he stuck with the process with Elijah with determination. And the experience of his doing so is recorded in the OT thus bearing witness to the efficacy, the importance of waiting (the first step in any faithful transition or change in life). As we noted earlier, Elisha had already waited through a period of time while he was “servant” to Elijah. Perhaps he was thinking that his internship would never come to an end and that he would always be a “prophet-in-waiting.” From the moment Elijah had rather carelessly thrown his mantle over the shoulders of this young man as he passed by him in I Kings, Elisha had waited for events to unfold. Waited without much insight or guarantee of outcome. All he really had was the confidence that God was at work in him and in his life. It was enough.

You and I come to the story as this waiting is approaching its concluding scenario and the unfolding of outcome has picked up pace a bit. Elijah is at the end of his life, and Elisha, his waiting having paid off, has developed and matured at least enough to be able to request that he be given the role that Elijah has had as prophet. Through Elisha we see, that one of the essentials that occurs in this first step of “waiting” through transitions and changes in life is a kind of maturity and preparation that we do not have when we get started. We must be made ready, become prepared for what comes next. And that takes time. At the initial time of the reluctant tossing of the mantle onto Elisha’s shoulders, he was no more ready to turn around and be prophet the next day than I am ready to start running the technology of Woods Church tomorrow.

And in this phase of the transition, the depth of the preparation has gone deeper as well. We are told in the text that Elisha and Elijah were “walking and talking”. Some translations read, “They were talking as they went on, and holding communion with each other.” Wouldn’t you have loved to be the proverbial fly on that wall? Elijah had really important matters to share with this one who would continue on after him bearing the burden of the times, which were perilous. I am sure Elisha asked questions...ones which he was now ready to ask...and heard answers which he was at last prepared to absorb and understand.

Waiting, then, is necessary for our being made ready to take on what God is laying before us. The transitions and changes we are undergoing in our lives require us to wait so that we have the time to be made ready for what comes next. It is the first step.

But waiting does not mean that we are idle in this first step, for our “being prepared and made ready” is not something that just happens to us. In fact, it is often very complicated, difficult, challenging and even painful. There can be frustrations as we grapple with new and unfamiliar information and perspectives; tears as we grieve and let go; resistance and stubbornness about moving on and, of course, good old anxiety about the future itself. And yet, we, as faithful people, want to persist as Elisha did for we would be confident in that sure and certain hope set before us by God. If you are in your life now...transitioning, changing, waiting whether that be as a result of your own prayerfully inspired decisions or because of something beyond your control...if you are in your life now as Elisha was, know this: God has called you to this place with purpose and intention. Elijah tells Elisha, who held this belief, that ultimately what comes next is in God’s hands. “If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” Talk about angst! Even though they are both pretty sure what Elisha’s outcome will be, each accepts that God has the final say. And so both will wait upon the Lord’s sign...in this case, the vision of Elijah’s departure.

The learning to be gleaned from this is that we must be active in our waiting insofar as we turn ourselves over to God’s work in us. And we do so by keeping our eyes and hearts focused upon God. In Luke’s account of the two would-be followers of Jesus...ones who, like Elisha, were being asked to follow...we encounter an initial reluctance from them, a resistance to Jesus’ invitation (probably not unlike our own when faced with transition or change), “Lord, I will follow you anywhere, but...” they each say. But what? But *first*...first let me say good-bye to my family and *first* let me go and bury my father. Now, I do not believe that it was so much a problem that each wanted to tend to obligations, matters of the heart actually, in and of themselves. There is precedent with Jesus’ disciples in these matters of family and old friends. But they maintain focus on God first as, for example; Matthew calls together his companions and

invites Christ to talk with them. These natural human emotions were not, by themselves, that which incurred Jesus' rebuke, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is worthy for the kingdom of God." It is not the "but" that distresses Jesus so much. It is the "first." When following Christ, there can be no other "first" than focusing on the unfolding of God's call to us. Acceptance of that call to follow requires that God be put first. If the wanna-be disciple had declared he was going home to get his family so that they could follow too or to speak of Jesus to his companions and, thus, effectively, bid farewell to them as they had known him before becoming a follower of Jesus', would Jesus have resisted? And certainly there would be opportunity to visit family at some time in the future, so was "farewell" even necessary? Or the follower wishing to bury his father "first" as a natural courtesy places the matters of this world before the call of God. He does not say that he will go and preach Christ to the mourners. In both cases, these individuals were not yet ready...not yet prepared...to take on the mantle of discipleship or else, perhaps, they would have been inspired to pursue those actions as aspects of their discipleship instead of as priorities which were obstacles to their discipleship.

There are so many things in the arena of current events, worldly and personal, for which we wait. What will happen in the Gulf; what about our economy, the health care plan, Afghanistan, Iraq? Those issues readily translate into more local concerns of course. Will we be effective in our efforts to support our young people in this community or the multiple outreach programs we invest in? And then each one of us faces daily real worries about things like health: waiting for surgeries and then their outcomes; diagnoses and test results, family matters both immediate and congregational. And we commit them to prayer as we will this morning and that is a powerful and effective action while waiting.

And it is true; we cannot and will not, as individuals or even as a congregation be able to resolve them all...and we will be impatient. But our real impatience should be about getting to that place where God is able to transform and prepare us. And that willingness, that resolve, is something we can affect...and effect now. It is a choice, a decision, to entrust our lives and their actions, all the concerns we have, with confidence to God and to place ourselves in the Lord's service. The decision, at the risk of sounding like a real evangelist here, is to commit our lives to Christ...to turn our eyes and hearts to the heavens looking for the sign that surely comes to us in whatever form it takes that will confirm our authority to act as Christians who put God first.

The obstacles, our excuses, for not following now cannot be in the way. If Christ is saying to you, "Follow me," and you have other "but firsts" in mind, it is time to reorder the priorities. Not abandon those other aspects of living, but reorder them so that God can put you to work waiting to be prepared and made ready for service in this Kingdom. God needs you....we need you. So hurry up, and wait!