

2 Kings 2:1-2; 6-14
Galatians 5: 13-25
Luke 9: 51-62

I Will Follow But.....
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I recently read an article by a pastor who described a conversation with a colleague. They were bemoaning the problems of lower attendance and weaker commitment to their churches- the usual numbers game - and talking about how to be better evangelists. Pastors, will do almost anything, they observed, to make the teachings of Jesus palatable so that more people will join their churches.

The author's friend mused that, many are prone to preach sermons like, "Ten Ways Being a Christian Will Improve Your Life," but Jesus was far more prone to preach sermons like, "Ten Ways Following Me Will Mess Up Your Life." I liked that story. Here we sit week after week, reading stories about how difficult it is to follow a prophet or a messiah, and we expect lots of other people to come in the door and say, "Sign me up!" It's odd... illogical.

Which begs the question: what **did** I sign up for when I started down my particular path of discipleship? What does **anyone** sign up for when they respond to the call of God or to the 'follow me' of Jesus? What are we getting into?

Our scriptures give us a number of "call" stories: patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets and priests, disciples and apostles: it's an often- repeated theme, with many variations. Some of them involve a gentle calling voice, some involve a mind-blowing vision, some are a challenge to change direction completely. All are distant from our time and our culture. But, as I said, we read the stories faithfully as part of our spiritual practice, so there must be a way to make Scripture speak to us here and now – to find a meaningful call to us. Otherwise we might as well read passages from some great novel or the Valley News instead.

It's hard to make today's call stories speak to us, especially the Gospel passage. This is one of those readings we call a "hard saying" of Jesus. It seems a little over the top to require homelessness and desertion of one's family as a prerequisite for being a disciple. Many people read it and see it as impossible, except for a few saints, and throw up their hands. We turn the page and look for a place where Jesus asks something or teaches something a bit more doable, like love your enemies ☺. We definitely did **not** sign up for all this.

To help us delve into the passage a little deeper, I want to give you a framework of sorts: two statements about Jesus in this Gospel that will put his remarks in perspective. One: People thought Jesus might be Elijah, but he was **not** Elijah. Two: Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem.

So, to begin with, we'll look at this confusion about Elijah. Something about Jesus suggested to his contemporaries that he might be this ancient prophet, returned to life. Elijah was a prophet of the northern kingdom; Jesus came from the north. Elijah performed miracles of multiplying food and healing and raising from the dead; Jesus did the same things. Elijah criticized those in power; so did Jesus. Elijah had left for heaven on a fiery chariot, and legend said that he

would return when needed again; maybe this was that moment. Whenever Jesus gets a chance, though, he makes it clear that he is not Elijah or Jeremiah or John the Baptist come back to life. He is himself, and he has another purpose. When James and John suggest calling fire from heaven down on the inhospitable Samaritans, it's because that's exactly the sort of thing that Elijah did...and in ancient Samaria, too. In rebuking these hot-headed disciples, Jesus is saying, "my calling is different." Jesus has come to offer a lifeline, not a death sentence.

At this point in the Gospel story, he feels called to Jerusalem, he has set his face in that direction. For the next 9 or 10 chapters in Luke, he is on that journey, and all his actions and stories should be seen in that light. This journey brings a sense of danger, of urgency, of letting go. Much as someone plowing a field keeps an eye on a distant point to keep the furrow straight, Jesus has his eye on the horizon. The text says that "the days drew near for him to be taken up" – "taken up" meaning his rising out of our earthly sphere to God after the resurrection. He saw that his time with the disciples was limited, and was preparing for a future community without his physical presence.

So these walking conversations are told in shorthand. As so often happens, dialogue is not presented in a linear, question-response sort of way. Jesus' responses or comments may seem indirect or confusing. First, a person offers to follow him wherever he goes. Jesus neither refuses nor accepts this follower. He just makes a remark about animals who have nests and people who do not. We don't know if this dissuaded the potential disciple or not. Next Jesus asks someone else to follow him, just as he had called fishermen and tax collectors earlier. This one asks for permission to bury his father. This may have been code for, "I have to care for my parents until they die: that's my family obligation." Chances were that this person would have been deep in mourning, not on the road, if his father had just died. Jesus' response seems almost heartless: "Let the dead bury their own dead; but you go proclaim the kingdom of God." Once again, we do not know if this challenge was accepted. Finally a third candidate comes forward with a pledge of discipleship, to be redeemed as soon as he had said his goodbyes at home. Using the metaphor of a farmer plowing his field while looking back over his shoulder, Jesus says this attitude will not bring about the Kingdom of God. Did the applicant say, "OK. I don't need to say goodbye after all."? We don't know.

In the short term, this dialogue may have been taken literally. If the world is about to come to an end (as many people in the early church believed), forsaking home or parents or family ties may be a good choice: a first step of letting go of this world. But in order to build a community of love, we might have to interpret Jesus' strange and challenging remarks with a broader view. This would mean opening oneself up to an inclusive future, not keeping one's life narrow. What if "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" means: Following me is opening your heart to those with no homes. If you truly empathize with the Son of Man you will find another person's homelessness as painful as your own. When we sign up to follow Jesus, we crack open our hearts and find solidarity with each one that has no roof, no security.

As a pastor, I must find a new way to interpret "Let the dead bury their own dead." Being available for memorial services and for graveside services is what I do. It is an important ministry to our members and our community. But if burying the dead means only the backward look, only regret, only grief, then perhaps we do need to let this go. Somewhere in the words around each farewell, each funeral, we need to hear proclaimed the Kingdom of God: the goodness of God, our gratitude, our hope, our recognition of the way a person's spirit lives on in our community. We also need to know that we do not grieve alone, that it is not just my father or my mother that I care for and grieve for and bury. In the loving community of Jesus, we open our hearts to those left

orphaned (at whatever age). The ties that bind us mean that the burden of grief is always shared, with a sympathizing tear, as the old hymn says. When we sign up to follow Jesus, we crack our hearts open and find solidarity with each person who faces the death of a loved one.

What about the poor would-be disciple who just wants to go home for a quick good-bye? Even this natural request is met by a challenge to do everything with the Kingdom of God in mind. "Putting our hand to the plow," means focus and perseverance. Our family lives are not exempt from the call to the Kingdom. In fact, we let everything we learn here inform our family relationships. Then we look to the horizon: we expand our concept of family to include those who are different, those who are alone. In the kingdom of God, we can call those who were strangers "sister" and "brother." This is a lifelong challenge. When we sign up to follow Jesus, we crack open our hearts and discover love for the whole human family.

As times change, we cannot expect to be called exactly as people in the past were called. There is one divine source, but the summons are different. Elijah called Elisha in one way: as an apprentice of sorts just the one apprentice. He would dress like Elijah, learn from him, and inherit his position and authority. They were in a struggle with the powers of their day, and their weapons were anger and fire. Jesus called his disciples in another way, to another purpose. They were to proclaim the Good News of the coming Kingdom. He called not one, but dozens of people. Some left their homes, some opened their homes. They were to scatter and spread the gospel, and their tools were eloquence and love. We too are called, in our day. The risen Christ calls us, through the power of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit nudges us into a new, creative frame of mind. Informed by the stories of long ago, we strain to hear that call, and struggle to know how to react. We learn to be prophets, with the definition that Catholic theologian Joan Chittester gives: "Prophets are those who take life as it is and expand it. They refuse to shrink a vision of tomorrow to the boundaries of yesterday."

In one sense, in the long term, we too have set our faces toward Jerusalem. Perhaps not with the same sense of urgency, but we will all come to the end of our earthly time, and follow Jesus into God's embrace. With that in view on the distant horizon, as our ultimate destination, we journey on this road, in the company of other travelers.

But Jesus' words also give us something to live by, every day. His challenging responses help us prioritize our tasks and our relationships, and help us define what is important. In a community that listens to his words, like this one, we can ask ourselves, "What are you called to do today?" - not called by the variable, shifting demands of our culture, but called by that Kingdom on the horizon. As the poet Mary Oliver says, "What is it you plan do with your one wild and precious life?" Surely it will be saying no to some things so that you can say yes to others. Surely it will involve thinking in terms of legacy, of who will follow us in our work and how to empower them.

I am always intrigued and excited to discover what following Jesus means to this congregation. What did you sign up for? What will we give up, what will we let go? What will we take on? What new relationships will be built? What will compel us forward as we put our hands to the plow, what will fuel our focus and perseverance? I see someone, out on the horizon. He's called me this far. I know he'll call us all to the Kingdom of God.