

Taking up the Challenge **2Kings 2:1-2,6-4; Luke 9:51-62**

Talking with the man who chaired the committee which worked on the lectionary we use to choose our scriptures I learned that the lessons are often chosen because of similar themes, ideas, or interests. When I look at the scriptures for today I am struck by several themes which tie them together. There is the matter of “being taken up to heaven” for example. A very few of the Biblical heroes had been granted that privilege. The very old patriarch Enoch, back in the book of Genesis “walked with God and was no more because God took him” (as opposed to all the other patriarchs who were said to have died) possibly Moses; said in Deuteronomy to have died and been buried in an unknown grave in Moab but in some traditions said to have been taken into heaven; and Elijah in this morning’s story.

Death is so much a part of human experience that we would really like to think there are a few exceptions, some other way to exit this earth. We would like to think that extreme faithfulness to God might be rewarded by being taken up into heaven without dying, or failing that, to be taken up as Jesus was after his resurrection.

Elijah is a good candidate for such special treatment. He had been God’s “right hand man” his faithful prophet, in struggles with the Priests of Baal, with the King of Israel and his pagan wife Jezebel, and in dealing with

drought, famine and even death itself. Even a prophet like Elijah knew when he had finished most of his work. There was much more to be done, of course, but Elijah had run his course. He headed down from the northern Kingdom of Israel through the worship site at Bethel (lit. “house of God”) and on to the Jordan river. If a final scene on the other side of the Jordan was proper for Moses, his later-day successor could hardly do otherwise. Elijah had a faithful disciple named Elisha, and Elisha would not let him go alone. Elisha had an ulterior motive; he wanted to inherit the role and task of Elijah. When he actually asks for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, (a double portion was the usual inheritance of the firstborn son) he is promised that if he shall see the actual dramatic conclusion of this drama he will indeed inherit Elijah’s spiritual power. The chariot and horses of fire come and take him away and Elisha returns to Israel to continue the good work.

When I think of the scene I remember one Sunday morning I went into the Jail where I was chaplain and found a prisoner about to be released. He was back in his own clothes, jeans and a leather vest but no shirt, his beard was braided in three little pigtails and tied with red ribbons and he was singing, “Swing Low sweet Chariot, angels going to carry me home...” Just then three big guys on Harleys rode up and the “angels” carried him home.

The scene just before Jesus' ascension is a bit more pointed in clarifying the dedication required of those who would take on God's work. Jesus met some opposition from the villagers in the Samaritan village and that was only to be expected since there was considerable distrust between Jews and Samaritans and a long-standing disagreement about whether it was proper to worship God in Samaria or only in Jerusalem. That kind of distrust is common even today. I remember the first time I went to the holy Land, the Israeli officials were careful not to stamp my passport but rather stamped a separate piece of paper and gave it to me because there were many countries which would not admit anyone who had previously traveled to Israel.

The Samaritans wanted nothing to do with someone going to Jerusalem. I like the way Jesus rebuked his disciples for their proposal to pray and command that fire from heaven come down and consume the village. When we are rejected we may well want to retaliate and bring down destruction but it is not a constructive response.

The rest of our Gospel lesson has to do with commitment. People wanted to follow Jesus and he noted that he was on a journey which is not easy. "Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head." Those Jesus invited to discipleship sometimes made excuses or wanted to follow but not just yet. It makes me think of the prayer,

I think, of St. Augustine, “Lord make me chaste, ... but not just yet!” The people who were trying to postpone their commitment until they had fulfilled their family responsibilities were missing the urgency of the call. If we wait till it is convenient to follow Jesus we may miss out completely. At the very least we will waste some of our limited and precious life on lesser things. Incidentally, that is why waiting till the end of life to try to get right with God and neighbors is a poor idea.

Without wanting to compare myself with either Elijah or Jesus,(I am much too easy going, self indulgent, and limited in spiritual power,) I am conscious that I have come to the end of the work I felt called to do here in First Parish Church. The work is, of course, not finished. There remain many challenges and opportunities but I think you have had the benefit of whatever I am able to share and I am confident that the present staff and leadership and the person you will soon call to be associate Pastor will undertake some really significant ministries in this place.

I want to leave you then with the kind of challenge we see in Luke. Jesus told those who would follow him to “go and proclaim the kingdom of God”. That is still the task of Christians. To proclaim the kingdom of God is to live as though God is really in charge of our lives and of our world. It may mean taking a second, and loving, look at enemies. You and I do not have to

like all our neighbors in this little world, but it is a fact that God loves each of them and we have to take that into consideration when we are tempted to call down destruction on them. We may extend our attitude toward taxes to the costs of discipleship and try to get the most benefit for ourselves at the least possible cost, but the fact is: we get most of the good things in life when we give the most. We may be distracted by the many claims on our time and allegiance but in the final analysis if we put God first then we can be better parents and children, better citizens, better church folk and if we do not put God first the other “goods” may not count for much.

From Elisha discovering that he could part the waters of the Jordan and cross over dry shod to the simple Galilean fisherman discovering that they could change the world, people who have been willing to take up the challenge of Jesus’ invitation to “follow me” have been able to live abundantly and effectively. We can also.