

Somewhere Between Gilgal and Bethel
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14
6-26-2016

Spoiler alert: If Gilgal and Bethel are mentioned in a lectionary passage, hold onto your seat!!! Strange things, unexplainable things, unbelievable things happen in these places.

At Gilgal, Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan by splitting the Jordan in two, and leading the people across dry land. And when he was finished, he instructed a few people to build an altar out of twelve stones to mark this special occasion.

At Bethel, Jacob had a dream. He dreamed that there was a ladder connecting heaven and earth, and God stood on the top rung of that ladder. Jacob and God had a conversation whereby God promised Jacob that his inhabitants would inherit the land of Canaan.

And ever since each of those events, both places have been landmark locations in Biblical history. Today's lection offers something unique: a mention of both Gilgal and Bethel. Hang on to your hats boys and girls, we're in for an adventure!

As our lection begins, we join the prophet Elijah and his protégé Elisha. They are making their way from Gilgal. We're told that God intends to "take Elijah up into heaven."

God's relationship with Elijah is unique. It's every bit as special as the one God had with Moses. Moses was hand-picked to lead the people out of Egypt, and to help establish Israel's covenant with God. It's through Moses that Israel received the law, or Torah.

Elijah lives in a different era. There is no pharaoh, but there might as well be. The kings that Israel longed for have abandoned their covenant with God. Ahab and Ahaziah rebel against the ways of God. In response, God has instituted a new kind of servanthood: prophecy. Elijah is God's prophet, that one who will speak God's truth to the kings of this earth.

But today, we're told Elijah's time on earth is done. God is calling him home.

And here we find two opposing forces: On the one hand, a prophet, Elijah, not quite ready to let go of his responsibilities. (To be fair, it's hard to blame him. This is some kind of retirement party!). And on the other, a prophet-to-be, Elisha, not quite ready to let his teacher go, and not quite ready to assume his new role.

Elijah tells Elisha: "Stay here. The Lord has sent me to Bethel."

But Elisha is stubborn and loyal, and with the same gusto as Ruth, he says, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you!"

So the two men travel on to Bethel.

And when they are nearly there, they reach the Jordan River. And once more, Elijah encourages his student to stay behind: “You’ve been a good sport. And I appreciate it. But really, why don’t you let the professional prophet handle it from here?”

Elisha, just shrugs: “Not a chance, dude. I’m coming with you.”

Again, neither man is quite ready to let go.

So here they stand. The same river that stood before Joshua stands before these two men. Only this time, they’ll cross the opposite way.

Elijah is wearing a mantle. It’s kind of like a cloak that covers his shoulders. Elijah takes this mantle, and rolls it like a towel you would snap at the pool. And he takes the mantle and slaps it against the water. And as he does this, the water parts, and Elijah and Elisha walk across dry land to the other side of the river.

Once they make it to the other side of the river, Elijah asks his friend what it is he can do for him before God takes him away.

Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. And I know what you are all thinking. Is he being greedy? Is he basically asking to super-size his value meal?

He’s not. What he’s asking is to receive the share that would be given to a first-born son – not just property, but title and position. The son who inherits his father’s household, also inherits his father’s work. When Elisha asks for a double-portion, he’s asking to become God’s appointed prophet.

And once more, Elijah shows he’s not quite ready to give up that role. “It’s not mine to give,” he says. “It’s God’s to give.” (But to be fair, God sent Elijah to anoint Elisha for prophecy years before this event. On some level, Elijah knows what will happen.)

He tells Elisha that if Elisha sees him while he’s being taken, then he’ll know he’s received such a portion. But if he hasn’t, he won’t.

The two men continue walking. And as they walk, the real adventure begins. A chariot of fire and horses of fire appear and separate the two men. And Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind.

I think we have a tendency to brush over that description a little too quickly. This is that same powerful, terrifying, mysterious God we meet on Mt. Sinai. A force so big and so strong and so untamed, the only way we can describe it is to describe fire and earthquake.

I’ve never stood in the middle of the desert as a chariot and eight horse marched passed me. I did watch Game of Thrones last week, and there was a battle scene where a character stands between charging horses. And I have been at a horserace and felt the earth shake when the crowd comes round the bend. So maybe I kind of understand. But imagine how the ground must have shook as those horses strode round and round Elisha. And imagine the heat he felt against his forehead. And imagine the cloud of dust those horses must have stirred up. And imagine how the winds must have howled in the middle of this frenzy. And imagine the courage of a man who could keep looking at his friend in the midst of this chaos. And imagine the calling of such a man. For we’re told in Exodus that when God

appeared at Sinai, all but Moses were told to cover their eyes and ears, for the sight and sound of God would kill them. Shoot, even Elijah had to hide in a cave to survive the presence of God, as God passed by. And yet Elisha stood in the midst of the whirlwind with his eyes wide open.

And Elisha cried out again and again, "Father! Father! The Chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"

And then it was over. And when he could no longer see the things he'd seen, Elisha tore his clothes in two and wept. Are we ever ready for our friends to leave us, even when they know and we know it's coming?

And Elisha looks down and sees the mantle of Elijah. He takes the mantle, walks back to the Jordan's bank, and slaps it against the water. As he does so, he asks, "Where is the God of Elijah?"

Turns out, God was with him. And as his mantle hits the water, the river parts, and Elisha, like Joshua before him, walks across on dry land. And Elisha, like Joshua before him, will inherit God's appointed leadership. Joshua crossed over the Jordan, and in so doing, carried on the legacy of Moses. Elisha, having crossed the Jordan, will follow the lead of Elijah, and continue the line of prophets who speak God's truth to the kings of this world.

And what of Elijah? Elijah followed in the path of Moses. He laid the foundation of the work that was to be done on the other side of the Jordan. And here on this side of the Jordan, he returned from whence he came, joining Enoch, as the only other figure in the Hebrew Bible to ascend to God.

I think today's lection is a story about how we live between two places: Bethel and Gilgal

As we move from east to west approaching Bethel, the sun sets on the life of service God has called us to: we've led the people as far as we can go; we've told the kings as much as God has commanded us to tell. It's time for us to rest.

As we approach Bethel, we wonder: "Who will pick up our mantle?"

As we move from west to east approaching Gilgal, we move toward the future God has planned for us: we are covenant people, freed from the wilderness and inhabitants of new life in Canaan; we are prophetic people, determined to speak God's truth in a world insistent on ignoring it.

As we approach Gilgal, we wonder: "Are we the people God has called us to be? Can we lead like those who have led us?" "Are we worthy to wear the mantle?"

Whether the ancient Israelites, or the Acts Community, or Sardis Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, heeding God's call is a tricky thing. Like Elijah, we must accept when God gently nudges us to let another leader emerge. And like Elisha, we must have the faith and courage to believe that God has indeed called us.

How do we do such a thing? When the whirlwinds come, and friends, they will come, we must keep our eyes open, and our hearts clean to discern the plans God has for us. And we must remember that we are equipped: Through Moses, God has given us the law. And through Elijah, we have received a double-portion of God's spirit.

There's no telling how these gifts will manifest themselves in each of our lives. Perhaps, when we finally make it to Bethel we too will see chariots of fire. Perhaps, when we make our way back to Gilgal, God will give us the power to split apart Lake Norman and walk clear across to the other side. Maybe so. We belong to a remarkable and mysterious creator. Or maybe, as we travel in between such tangible extremes, we'll have the opportunity to notice the more subtle, but no less miraculous miracles God works everyday: mended relationships; belonging for the excluded; LOVE: tangible, abundant, messy, crazy, earth-shattering love.

One thing's for sure: God's plan will involve our willingness to love and serve one another faithfully and consistently.

And as we travel along the points between Gilgal and Bethel, I doubt we'll lack for opportunity, or even adventure.

As a matter of fact. Look out on the horizon. Way out on the horizon. I think I see Elijah's mantle. It's waiting for the next prophet to wear it. Who's next?

Amen.