

There is a strong similarity between today's two scriptures readings. Both stories offer encouragement, nay mandate, to stick together, move along and leave some things behind. And to do so with faith by embracing the positive power of God's reign, accepting God's majesty and sovereignty rather than our own, honoring the difference between being self-centered and God-centered. When we stick together, we surround God and are surrounded by God, wrapped in the mantle of God.

The first story from the Hebrew scriptures, when Elisha inherited Elijah's mantle and his prophetic position, actually begins earlier in 1 Kings when Elisha was initially asked to leave his parents behind to follow Elijah. It reads:

<sup>19</sup> So [Elijah] set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. <sup>20</sup> He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah<sup>[a]</sup> said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" <sup>21</sup> He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

So basically, Elijah scoffed at Elisha about his desire to say goodbye. Then Elisha performed a ritual that signified ... his break with old ways of being. He ended his relationship with his family and ran to catch up with his mentor, Elijah. Elisha stuck with Elijah.

We can imagine what it is like to want to say goodbye. I know when I am leaving for a trip, I call my children, my mother and my brothers to say goodbye and tell them that I love them. You might do the same. It's the same when we are called out of our daily routines and into new situations.<sup>1</sup>

The second story, from the Christian scriptures, is of disciples wishing to say goodbye to their families when Jesus called them to follow him. They wanted the opportunity to connect one last time before they went off on this unknown nomadic journey. Yet, Jesus scoffs at them and says, "Let the dead bury the dead."

And "There's no looking back."

Christian discipleship is just that – a nomadic journey, leaving people, places, and things behind, without a clear understanding of where we are going to land. To stay alive on this journey – in body or in spirit – requires sticking together with those who have a similar focus.

You can be sure that Elisha didn't know what was to come for him after he watched his mentor ascend in a chariot of fire. But he kept his focus on the journey he was on, picking up the mantle and where Elijah left off – indicating his prophethood by performing the same water parting that Moses and Elijah both performed. By the way, a mantle is a loose, sleeveless garment like cloak or a robe. It is also a symbol of authority. So when Elijah picked up the mantle he claimed his authority and put on his "uniform", and he also replaced his own garment that was torn in mourning his lost mentor.

Elisha followed what he understood to be God's will, although he didn't know clearly what God's will for him was. Elisha had to discern God's will by participating in events. He had to watch the chariot and the whirlwind. He had to pick up the mantle. He had to attempt to part the Jordan. Elisha confirmed his call through his actions. Elisha's story suggests for us that faithfulness may be expressed by a commitment to discerning God's will, a

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, David L.. Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16) . Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

focus on being open to hearing God. Faithfulness may be expressed by embracing the suspense or ambiguity that is part of life, and asking, “What is God calling me to do in this situation?” Elisha also suggests that we may have to discern God’s will through [our own] action.<sup>2</sup>

So, Elisha stuck with God, and with the spirit of Elijah. He kept his focus. He was a disciple.

Those whom Jesus called to follow him had no idea where they were going either. But Jesus knew.

He set his face toward Jerusalem. “Setting one’s face” implies determination. Setting one’s jaw. It is resoluteness, single-mindedness. It is focusing one’s direction toward something. Jesus knew that he was heading toward his death. And still he persisted toward Jerusalem, through a land where “his kind” was not welcome.

He tried to explain what the new disciples might expect. He knew that those who chose to follow his path may find that they have no place to call home, either physically or spiritually.<sup>3</sup> Remember that Jesus had preached in his home temple and been laughed out of town. Remember that he instructed his disciples that on their travels if they were not welcome in a village they were to shake the sand out of their sandals and move on. And in this reading, he told them that even though animals have places to live, God’s prophets may not have a home.

True today as well. Our callings are not always conveniently located just outside our front door. Sometimes we have to travel and stay other places to fulfill God’s will. And sometimes our callings as Christians aren’t always welcomed culturally or politically. The immigration debacle at the southern border that we are experiencing right now is a perfect example of that. Our Christian understandings cannot abide by the exclusion and treatment of the migrants. And our government doesn’t want to accept that.

Being a disciple was never promised to be easy. Discipleship calls us to a higher standard, to the *via positiva* of affirming God’s goodness, grace, salvation and reign in our world, even in the midst of evil and suffering.<sup>4</sup> Discipleship means living in ways we might not otherwise live.

The umbrella truth above this whole topic of discipleship is that being a Christian and a disciple of Jesus gives us a whole new identity. We are no longer simply a biological unit on this earth, but a child of the God of the whole universe.

And because of that we claim that identity, and follow Jesus and to live and proclaim God’s reign immediately – not as some after-death hope, but as a world changing reality that we can experience and share now, right where we are. We are called to bring heaven and earth together. To bring the world back together through God’s eternal, unconditional, radical love.

Our discipleship will bring a new society in view, a new way of being with neighbor, a new way of understanding God’s presence in the world. It will cause us all to be stuck together in a way that we can’t even fathom today.

Jesus’ response to legitimate requests to postpone the journey reminds Christians in every generation that there are always justifiable excuses to defer the journey or put off the claims of discipleship. Other important matters compete for our attention. Some must make heart-wrenching choices, but there is urgency about Jesus’ mission to bring forth God’s reign. Jesus compels us to proclaim the Kingdom of God. This is our Christian vocation and must be our first priority.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bartlett, David L.. Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16) . Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> <http://sacredise.com/lectionary-resources/proper-8c/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=623](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=623)

We can respond to Jesus' call with excuses. Or we can respond to Jesus' call by sticking with him and keeping our focus. Jesus walks, moves, doesn't stick around. He doesn't wait until we figure out our plans, until we have vested our 401(K), said our goodbyes and wrapped up loose ends. To be a disciple, to follow Jesus, is to go when the teacher goes, follow where the teacher leads. To stick together. ... "Staying close" or sticking with Jesus disrupts our stable world of fixed religion; it requires us to stick less to this or that place whether it is a physical place or a place of practice or ideas. ... We never know where "stay close" or sticking with Jesus and each other could take us.<sup>6</sup>

We do know, though, that no matter where we go, God is with us, and will guide us if we allow the mentor and teacher to lead us. We just have to be willing to hit the road. Maybe it starts by getting out of the ox pen. Norman Vincent Peale said, "Throw your heart over the fence and the rest will follow."

May we follow faithfully, stick with Jesus and each other, so that God's love and justice will be the focus of all. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.ekkesiaproject.org/blog/2013/06/stay-close/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=stay-close](http://www.ekkesiaproject.org/blog/2013/06/stay-close/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=stay-close)