

Third Sunday After Pentecost – Zach Marshall

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

This is the second time I've preached at St. Paul's—ever, to be honest—and I'm noticing that I have a penchant for drawing passages where God calls the prophets and Jesus is in a really bad mood. I'm not sure what that is about. They say God has a sense of humor—perhaps she does.

Anyway, as usual, I want to begin by pointing out that the full scene of each passage matters. The scene is something that we don't necessarily get from scripture, although I think most of us create a scene for the passage when we imagine it. In this week's case, I think I also need to say that tone matters—the tone of voice. Because we get some pretty cranky prophets. First, you've got Elijah: *Go back again, for what have I done to you?* And then Jesus, *Let the dead bury their own dead.* We think, okay then! I mean, come on! If Jesus hadn't gone into ministry, he would have had a career writing fiery comebacks.

Let's start by spending a moment with the passage from Luke: Jesus *sets his face* toward Jerusalem; some messengers, maybe the disciples, go to prepare some lodgings among the Samaritans; *but they* [the Samaritans] *did not receive him* [Jesus], *because his face was set toward Jerusalem.* This passage is a little opaque, and different folks interpret it differently. Was it Jesus or the Samaritans who decided that he wouldn't be staying with them? Here's a possible way that it's both: maybe the Samaritans said to themselves, "He's not coming to Samaria—his face is set toward Jerusalem—so why do we have to entertain him at all?" But his disciples want to start something over it; they say, "Hey, want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them? Because, you know, you basically said that you gave us the power to do stuff like that." And Luke doesn't even write down what Jesus said next. *He rebuked them.* It was **that bad**. You get a sense that Jesus is so cranky right now. Because right after that and all the way to Jerusalem, he's got people running up to him saying, "I'll follow you," and the subtext is, "Hey, Jesus, I can tell you're unhappy right now, so I'll follow you. Will that make your mood better?" Jesus fires back to the first person with, "The foxes have it better than I do, buster." The next person fares worse. He's got a really good excuse. He could use it to miss work, skip the family vacation with the in-laws, anything! "Jesus, I'll follow you, but my dad just died, and I need to go bury him first." And Jesus—always one for verbal riposte—fires back with *Let the dead bury their own dead.* Translation: "You think I care that you're dad just died?" I'm not sure what the answer to that rhetorical question is, but the would-be disciple's response didn't make it into Luke's account. Then that leads us into the third joiner: "Jesus, I'm coming, but I'm just going to run home and kiss mom and dad goodbye first." The order here surprises me, because I would have put this guy first had I been writing Luke's account—the fox guy was willing to follow, and Jesus just puts him off. Why not end with that? But we end with this guy who loves his mom and dad and, like a good child, obeyed when they said to ask their permission first if he wants to go on a potentially life-threatening journey with a transient miracle man who's about to get lynched—this guy **also** gets put off with a retort. "If you turn back even once, you're not fit for this thing." What?! I mean, come on, Jesus! This guy was going to go with you, he's just trying to do his duty by Mom and Dad. What about Mother's Day? What about Father's Day? What about Focus on the Family? The message is right in their name, Jesus. We thought you were all about that stuff.

And it's a little funny if I put it this way, perhaps. But I worry that Jesus is not just in a bad mood but perhaps dead serious. Dead serious. Soon to be dead serious.

And, of course, Luke puts the three would-be converts in this order because he wants to get that reference to the great prophet Elijah in there. So let's go back now and set the scene with Elijah and Elisha. But first, a question. Why does Jesus or Luke mess with the reference? Elisha burns his plow, but Jesus says to keep your hand to the plow. What's with the difference? See if you can figure it out.

Well, let's go back. We're back in ancient Israel, and things are going... pretty bad. Enter the great prophet Elijah, one of the greatest talkers-back to people in power of all time. He is not going to respect your power, and he's got the mad skills to back himself up, like the ability to ask God to send some of God's all-consuming fire from heaven. He's basically a pre-modern Liam Neeson or Chuck Norris in ragged clothing.

In our passage, Elijah comes to appoint—I mean, anoint—his successor, along with a couple of kings, including a pagan king, by the way. My default imagined setting for Elijah is in a very stony desert with scattered red rock cliffs, but I've got to reorient because this story takes place in the green hills of Israel—Abel-meholah. We're at the wealthy estate of Shaphat, who has all of his children and hired hands plowing the fields so that they can plant some grain and continue their prosperous life. Why do I think they're prosperous? Because they have twelve sets of oxen. Every year around planting time, Shaphat, his strapping sons, a couple of strapping daughters too, and maybe a hired hand or two all yoke up pairs of oxen from their herd to plow and plant. And you can bet they're all ranked in order of good plowing skills. Abba Shaphat leads them with the first team of oxen. He gets the best pair because he's the best plow-hand and so that he won't slow down everyone behind him. And then his sons get to pick their pairs, oldest first—there's like six of them: Jimmy, Danny, Robbie, Mark, Steve, and Phil; then the hired hands, Jedediah and Malachiah; then the daughters (sorry, this story still takes place under the patriarchy), named something like Shemiah the strong and Isha the awesome. They all get to pick their oxen in order of relative ability. Somehow, Elisha is going last. Why? Because he's the slowest. Maybe he's the most distracted. They're not going to put him ahead of anyone because he'll just slow the whole line down. The text is unclear as to whether Elisha was simply not a strong dude or twelve years old or whether he was that youngest son who pretends to be weak and slow so he can get out of doing as much work as his older brothers and sisters. "Sorry, Dad, I know you all plowed at least 22 rows and I only did 12; I guess I'm just a lot weaker than the rest of you." You probably knew someone who shirked like this at some point in your life.

But Elisha dreams of great things for himself. We could almost cue the Disney music here. He wants so much more than this provincial life! He's not just a street rat. He wants the chance to choose his own fate! Once he lets it go, he'll go that far. He doesn't want to be the youngest, trapped in Abel-meholah, following the behinds of a pair of oxen, at the bottom of the pecking order, always getting the smallest portions of food, the skinniest oxen, the bed on the floor in the corner by that crack in the wall that the ants get in through. In fact, he hates plowing. He wants to do something that will get everybody's attention. He wants to change the world! He wants to—get ready for it—take things to the next level! He's not quite sure what that means yet or what that would look like, but he wants it so bad.

And so then, on the day of the big plowing, a man shows up on the edge of the field. Elisha sees him in the distance and then closer as he nears that side with his slow, skinny team of oxen. He wonders who the stranger is. He is not a hired hand. He is not a **hirable** hand. You can tell just by looking. He looks like the kind of guy who hasn't shaved in three years and has been eating nothing but the bread and meat that the ravens bring to him. He looks like the kind of guy who just met the Almighty at the mountain of God in the Negev, got most of his hairs singed, and came straight here right after without stopping for anything. That strange man walks right over to Elisha without saying a word; he gets all the way up to Elisha, right next to him, still not saying a thing, and he takes off his cloak and throws around Elisha's shoulders.

I wonder whether Elisha saw this as his moment. I have a suspicion that people didn't just know what the great prophet Elijah looked like. I have an inkling that people really didn't commonly know who Elijah was until awhile after his death. He wasn't like the hero Pretty Boy Floyd in the Woodie Guthrie song, who was known as a grassroots leader and welcome in every home in Oklahoma despite the fact that he was a fugitive. Elijah was just some guy. A stranger. Honestly, a tramp. Yeah, I know, that Liam Neeson stuff earlier was a bit misleading. Was Elisha ecstatic? Was he thrilled to have a smelly tramp throw his smelly cloak over him? Did he realize that his moment had actually come, his opportunity to change the world?

At the same time, I wonder how Elijah felt about his successor-to-be. "Who did the Almighty pick for me? Oh, I see, the young shirker with the weakest oxen struggling to plow a straight furrow at the back of the twelve teams. Perfect. I walk ninety miles in the heat for **that** guy!" I wonder if Elijah noticed the looks of concern on the faces of the older sons and daughters of Shaphat. Maybe at first he wondered if they would become defensive, noticing that a strange tramp was throwing his dirty cloak over their younger brother, and shoo him away like a crazy stray. But then they did nothing; they didn't really care. They turned back to their work. They thought, "A stranger is conscripting, perhaps even radicalizing our little brother for some cause? Great. Get him off our hands. That's no great loss. He always had his head in the clouds, thinking he was better than us despite the fact that he didn't pull his weight." (Oh wait, wrong family, wrong prophet. My bad. I guess that's a recurring theme of scripture.)

Elisha experiences this as a moment of indecision. He says, "Let me kiss Mom and Dad, and then I'll come." The writer of First Kings doesn't clarify whether this was a good thing or a bad thing to say. To us, it probably doesn't sound so bad, almost like "Yeah, great, let's kick this off." But this is a tough decision, and as a reader you get a sense that it's a touch-and-go moment. What does Elijah say to this ornery teenage smart-mouth? Does he speak to Elisha out of the decades of experience and wisdom that he has gained as God's prophet? Not really. Elijah experiences it as the moment of indecision that it is. He says, "Oh yeah?" *Go back again. For what have I done to you?* It's not a nostalgic correction: "Look Elisha, back when I was your age, we didn't smart mouth God's prophet." It's also not reassurance, "Oh, that sounds fine. Go back again and give them a kiss. Make sure you tell them that my prophet-training program is fully accredited and that you can cover your living costs through loans—you won't even have to ask them for very much money." Oops, I forgot I was talking to a university crowd. My bad. No. Elijah is as cranky as you would expect the guy to be. You have to realize that he just fed the Almighty a garbage sap story at God's holy mountain about how he was the only good citizen left, and the Almighty called him on it and made him schlep back across Israel to cause more

trouble. This is sarcasm at its most off-putting: *Go back again. For what have I done to you?* The subtext is, “And if you’re stupid enough to think I’m being literal right now, I will call fire down from heaven on you, boy.”

More indecision follows. Elisha realizes that this is his big moment. Or it’s a moment, and if it’s not a big one, then it’s still the only moment he’s going to get. But he doesn’t know what to do. So he thinks, “Umm... okay... well, how about I... uh... slaughter these oxen right here, right now, chop up the yoke, and cook them over it so that... uh... everyone here can at least eat a good meal, including you, tramp man, how about that?” This response somehow seems good enough to Elijah, good enough to make it into the official story in the Bible. If you’re like me, though, your response is “What?!?” What in the world, scripture!? I mean—he obviously had to go back to the house to get a pot big enough to boil two oxen! Why is this how the story ends?

I think Elisha figured out pretty quick that he screwed up. He had the wrong response. This moment is pretty good for the men of scripture. Think of Peter—God says, “It’s okay to eat the non-kosher stuff, Pete”; “No thanks, God.” Or Paul—God says, “The Gentiles get to be a part of my Kingdom too”; “Are you sure you want to let them in, God?” Good thing the Bible has cleared up all the difficult decisions for us in the 21st century. But Elisha, he burns his oxen. Let me put it a different way that makes it clearer: he burns his ship—his one way to go back to his former life. Instead of running to Mom and Dad hoping they’ll talk him out of it, he burns the means of returning to a system of production that allows an unjust system of exploitation to simply carry on as if nothing bad is happening. Once they all eat those grilled oxen steaks, he can’t go back to plowing. Not only that, but think of Abba Shaphat’s response. “You burned your oxen? Over my plow?! WTH, Elisha. You’ve always been a screw-up, but this is the last straw!” It would be like totaling your parent’s car on purpose. It would be like giving up your health care or your retirement account. It would be like telling your boss off. You don’t get to stay here anymore.

So this is the moment that Jesus wants to reach out of the past and grab. That fierce sarcasm of Elijah and the radical response of Elisha. That story of slaughtering the animals **right now**. Jesus looks to the potential disciple on the road and says, “You think this is a joke? You think this is about burning the heretics? You think you can appease my bad mood by giving me what you think I want? He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom! You want to be saved? You better slit that ox’s throat right now, boy! You’d better chop that yoke apart, girl, and burn it!” I half expect that the would-be disciple turned to a pillar of salt right there on the road. More realistically, I imagine they had a chip on their shoulder the rest of their life: “Geez, I was just trying to help, and this is the response I get!”

What’s the point? The point is that everybody is mad at everybody. Everyone is tired to death of everyone. Elisha’s sick of his life, his brothers, his dad, his small town full of bigoted people whose only interest is in being backward and making other people just as backward. Elijah’s sick of being the great prophet of God and not even having a hole or nest to settle down in, let alone a nice piece of agricultural real estate; he’s definitely not the kind of person who can say with the Psalmist, *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places*. Elisha’s family is ready to be rid of him, the conceited whiny punk who thinks he is destined for something better than them. The Samaritans are tired of Jesus since he’s going to worship at Jerusalem and is, apparently, too

good for their ways of worshipping. The disciples are totally tired of the Samaritans—they are so ready to avoid their town and call down fire from heaven because they believe different stuff. Did I mention that the disciples were already really tired of each other because each one is convinced he's the top disciple? The people on the road just want Jesus to get out of this weird funk he's in right now.

This is the world in which God calls us to action. This whiny end-of-vacation world in which everybody just needs to be alone right now. Not the mountaintop. Not the vineyard. Not the pasture. Your calling happens in the car ride after you've already been there for eleven hours and have nothing but the prospect of another work week to look forward to! Your calling happens after you've been working at the same place for ten years and know its problems only too well! This is the messy world in which the Almighty calls us. You are all tired of someone. Your annoying family with their crazy, internet-fueled beliefs. Your annoying colleagues with their crazy, internet-fueled beliefs. What about "those people" who are doing things wrong, making demands that seem unreasonable to you, perhaps even living in sin? You're totally tired of them. Why don't they see the world the way you and God see it? Maybe you're ready for the Almighty to send fire down on those Samaritans. Maybe you hope that if you leave them alone, they'll leave you alone. This is the messy world in which God calls us to action.

But it's time to barbecue your oxen. And I'm not saying that you all should stop what you're doing and use the fuel in your cars to burn them and give away the molten scrap metal, although that's an interesting way to see it. This is the really tricky part. Because of the current structures of our world and the capital-C church, we think we know what God wants. We think we know what it means to live with the Spirit and not under the law, all those many abstract qualities that Paul describes, both good and bad, in the Galatians passage. But maybe we don't. We certainly don't understand why Jesus was so short with people. We don't know what it would mean to walk out of here right now and do what the Almighty wants, no ifs, ands, or buts. This is one of those parts of scripture that people don't like to take literally. That's a shame, isn't it? We want to rationalize, to play the long game, to say we're playing the long game, at least until we figure out what exactly "the plow" is sometime in the future.

So finally, why does Jesus or Luke change the reference there? I asked that question a while back. Jesus basically says to keep your hand to the plow rather than burn it. That's a pretty big revision of Elijah's statement. I'm going to guess that Luke wasn't able to Google the text real quick, for one thing, when he was writing his gospel. I also think it doesn't really matter. Sorry to disappoint you. What do looking back, hesitating, or double-checking with mom and dad have in common? They are responses to a situation based on what a person is afraid of. What do keeping your face forward or burning your oxen have in common? Apparently, they both involve turning your back on some sort of security. I guess Jesus wants us to leave our safety nets so we can go critique unjust systems of oppression based in the idolatry and hypocrisy of political and religious rulers. I know this expectation fuels some of my biggest fears. What if I do or say something that makes me lose my job? What if I attend a protest and were to be arrested? What if I express unacceptable beliefs and get kicked out of my church? What if I have to sell my house and move in with my parents? Or what if people listen and I have to sustain a lot of effort to keep doing and saying what's right? I'd much rather run and hide, if I'm honest. I'd much rather convince myself that I'm wrong or being unreasonable or not participating in something

that's **that** bad than stand up for what I believe is right. Maybe I'm crazy, but I think things like this regularly. Jesus says to each of us, *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*