

Asking for the Hard Thing
2 Kings 2:1-12
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

As tends to be the case, there is so much in today's reading that is worth exploring.

Here we encounter the prophet Elijah. And let's take a minute to remember who he was. He was the prophet during the corrupt reign of Ahab, a time in the life of Israel when worship of the god Ba'al had spread, growing in power and appeal. This put Elijah in near constant and intense conflict with both Ahab and his wife, Jezebel.

Not only did Elijah call the king to task when he was unfaithful...not only did he battle with the prophets of Ba'al...not only did he bring a child back to life...but Elijah did all of this while the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

After all, one of the stories of Elijah we are most familiar with is when Jezebel was looking for him to kill him and Elijah was hiding in the wilderness begging God to end his life because he felt lonely and abandoned. But if we remember that story, it is there that God comes not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12b, NRSV) or the still, small voice as we often name it.

This is Elijah, the great prophet, who in today's story is near the end of his life. But, of course, his life does not end in the usual way. Rather, if we know today's story it is usually because we are mesmerized by this person being taken up "in a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11b). And given his unusual departure, it is Elijah who is expected to return, an expectation that is clear in Jewish rituals as well as in many of our Jesus stories.

While Elijah, therefore, is the more well-known of the prophets mentioned in today's story, it is really Elisha I want us to focus on. Because, just as we talked about a couple weeks ago when we read the passage from Deuteronomy where Moses was preparing the people for *his* successor, Elisha is the successor to Elijah. He is the prophet to whom Elijah passes the mantle.

And yet, I dare say, we know much less about him. If you were to go and read on in 2 Kings you would hear story after story of ways that Elisha battled against the worship of Ba'al which had become so common, ways that he took care of the people of Israel and helped show them God's kindness, ways that he spoke strongly on behalf of God calling the leaders and the people back to God's intention.

If you read those stories, it becomes clear that Elisha did, in fact, inherit the double share...in other words, it is clear that he was the heir to Elijah's role as prophet, the one to whom Elijah and God intended to pass on the mantle of leadership.

But, sometimes when we acknowledge things like that it becomes easy to just read past these transitions and even easier to not ask hard questions of ourselves. Because after all, we might just say that it was meant to be that Elisha should take over when Elijah was gone...we might just say that it was God's will...and when we say this then we forget to notice the boldness with which Elisha spoke.

But remember what Cameron read for us earlier: *When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not"* (2 Kings 2:9-10, NRSV).

While this idea of a "double portion" or "double share" is connected with the first born son, the rightful heir, let us not just dismiss it. Yes, when Elisha sees Elijah being taken up and when he receives the mantle of leadership, it becomes apparent that this gift has been given. But let us not underestimate the power of his asking.

Did you hear Elijah's response? "You have asked a hard thing," Elijah said to him.

You have asked a hard thing because doing the will of God is not easy.

You have asked a hard thing because following in the footsteps of someone with such a reputation is not easy.

You have asked a hard thing because choosing what is right does not always make you popular, in fact sometimes it makes you very unpopular.

You have asked a hard thing because when you speak on behalf of God, you will get to share in some beautiful moments but you will also have to say some difficult things.

You have asked a hard thing because to hold yourself and others accountable to the ways of our God is not an easy task.

Elijah doesn't unpack for us why he calls this a "hard thing" but I suspect these and more reasons were involved.

So, friends, this story causes me to wonder...are we willing to ask a "hard thing"?

Are we willing to ask - not for fame or fortune, not for our own safety or wellbeing, not for the admiration of people or votes of popularity - but to ask to be part of what God is doing in this world even when it is difficult?

Are we willing to ask to be a voice through which God speaks even when God's message is not easily received?

Are we willing to ask that our lives, our resources, our very beings be used for the work of God in this world?

Are we willing to look back at the people we most admire - those who risked themselves for others, those who spoke truth even when lies were trying to tell the story, those who stood with God for justice and compassion - are we willing to look back at them and not only admire their lives but ask to be part of their movement, to even take on greater risk and speak a more difficult word?

Friends, much like in the time of Elijah and Elisha, our world needs truth telling...our world needs people who will stand, not for values that claim to be faithful but are really about holding and hoarding power, but for the values of our loving God...our world needs people who are willing to stand up for the vulnerable and stand up to those who are abusing their power.

Our world needs people who are willing to participate in the ways of God that alongside God and each other, we might usher in the kin-dom.

The journey will not be easy...look to the prophets, it never has been. But sometimes the very thing to which we are called is the hard thing. May we not only be willing, but may we be ready, that alongside God we might commit to doing the hard thing as we live faithfully. Amen.