

Facing Jordan

Sermon 22 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 30, 2019

2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14

We've all heard the joke, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" And we all know the traditional punch line, "To get to the other side."

But have you heard the Chuck Norris response? Somebody asked Chuck the question, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" He responded,

"If you saw me coming, you'd have crossed that road too!"

Or maybe you have heard the CIA response:

"Give us fifteen minutes with the chicken and we'll tell you."

My favorite version is the response of the adventurous chicken.

"To go boldly where no chicken had ever gone before."¹

After spending some time actually walking across some roads with a child, I wonder sometimes if the reason we tell this joke over and over again, is to ingrain within our minds the danger that crossing the road can actually bring. One thing that children and dogs have in common is that they seem to be completely oblivious to the natural boundaries that roads provide. The sidewalk ends, it often has a dip so the step onto the road is more easily traversed. The colors change as we switch from concrete to asphalt. Sometimes there's a stop sign visible. Where we walk, my family and I, there are multiple visual clues that danger lies ahead where the sidewalk ends and the street begins. A simple stop, look, and listen will help us find the right time to cross and *most* of the time, we don't have to wait too long. But for children, the joke surely reinforces that crossing the street is an activity that requires caution.

Most of us learn to respect street crossings and other boundaries, both visible and invisible, by the time we reach adulthood. Boundaries define geographic and political areas. They help us set limits. They define spaces that we believe to be safe, and others that we might consider to be unsafe.

If we were to read the Elijah stories with a keen eye on boundaries, we might note that most of the action takes place within the geo-political boundary of Israel. Not the modern-day Israel, created in 1947 and then modified twenty years later in 1967, but the ancient kingdom established by the Hebrew people and their God. The kings who ruled this Israel were divinely appointed by birth and when they got out of line (which was more often than not) God sent prophets to speak difficult and courageous truths to those who sat on the throne. Elijah, as we learned last week, is this kind of prophet. Because his calling is to speak God's truth to the kings of Israel, most of the action takes place within her geo-political boundary.

¹ <https://short-funny.com/cross-the-road-jokes.php> retrieved June 27, 2019.

There are a few exceptions, however, when Elijah ventures out past the kingdom boundaries of Israel and steps into the unruly chaos of wilderness. Last week we read from 1 Kings chapter 19, and we followed Elijah into the wilderness where he met God in the silence. Now he is back in Israel, on what seems like a farewell tour of important cities, and he has others with him. Namely Elisha and a whole company of prophets. These are likely younger prophets who are learning from Elijah. But Elisha is distinguished from the crowd because he is the lucky prophet upon whom Elijah cast his mantle.

The mantle was a piece of clothing, sort of like a long vest or a sleeveless robe, that was meant to protect the prophet from natural elements (sun, rain, dust, etc). In the case of Elijah, it has also become a symbol of God's presence and divine power. You may remember, in the cave on Mt. Horeb, after God met Elijah in the silence, his response was to wrap his face in the mantle before stepping outside. This act reminds us of how Moses' face shone after God passed him by on the same mountain, also called Sinai. So, Elijah's mantle does not hold power on its own, it is not the source; but it becomes the symbol of God's power at work through the prophet Elijah.

In today's reading, the prophets travel throughout Israel, visiting towns like Bethel and Jericho. Eventually they get to the Jordan and Elijah asks Elisha (for the third time) to leave him there, to let him cross the Jordan alone. Elisha says, "No, I will not leave you." The verb for "leave" actually has more force than English translations might suggest. What Elisha says is that he will not "abandon" his master, his teacher. Not at Bethel, not at Jericho, and not at the Jordan.

As the two prophets – master and disciple – stand facing the Jordan, they might have remarked at its power and beauty. Perhaps Elisha wondered how they would get across or what they might encounter on the other side? The Jordan was the natural boundary between the Kingdom and the wilderness. The fifty other prophets that made up the "company" who had traveled thus far with Elijah and Elisha must have seen all the visible warnings: "Caution, river ahead!" or "Beware: Kingdom Ends Here." Because they stayed back a good bit as the two kept on moving forward, facing the Jordan, following God's command.

At water's edge, Elijah takes off his mantle, rolls it up, and sticks it in the water. Miraculously, the water parts and the two walk across on dry ground. By this point all of us are thinking that this story is starting to sound exactly like the Exodus story, when Moses leads the people out of civilization, out of Egyptian bondage, and into the wilderness, where they will wait – trusting in God's provisions and guidance – to enter the promised land. Here, Elijah is like the new Moses, leading his disciple, Elisha, across a parted river, and into the wilderness, where they await God's arrival. This is one of those "no turning back" moments for Elisha, as he follows his teacher into a great unknown.

For the most part, 1st and 2nd Kings are historical books. They tell the story of the people of Israel, marking time by who is king. It's common for a story to begin, "In the eighteenth

year of King Jeroboam (1Kings 15)...” or “When Omri was King...” but this story, the one we read today, doesn’t include any indication of time related to a king or queen. Instead, it begins with, “Now, when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven...” This distinction separates what is about to happen from the conventional lens of history. This story is bigger than history and its primary instigator is more than any earthly King... it is God’s own self. God is directing the show, calling the prophets around Israel, through the parted waters of Jordan and eventually outside of civilization and out into the wild where we already know God works in mysterious ways, tending to our needs with angels, nourishing our hungers with daily manna, and coming to us in the sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah and Elisha stand on the edge of dry land, facing the mighty Jordan, they are not just considering crossing a major geographical boundary, they are embarking on an epic journey that will change everything. The text has already hinted that only one of them will return and nobody knows what’s going to unfold. But they take their steps forward anyway, because the “Lord has sent me to the Jordan” Elijah says.

Some of us know what it’s like to stand on the edge, facing the Jordan.

We know the cost of crossing over on dry ground, following the lure of the Spirit out into the wilderness. And we know the promise of finding God there.

The promise Elisha sought was a “double portion of his master’s spirit.” But what he received was an appointment all his own, a calling to pick up the mantle his teacher wore and take on the prophetic calling himself, one which the story has taught us, might cost him his life. Following someone with courage and conviction is much easier, much more comfortable than picking up the mantle and doing it ourselves.

I wonder if Elisha realized what he was asking for when he makes that bold request just before Elijah is taken to heaven? “Give me a double portion of your spirit.”

Reflecting on my own life I can name so many moments when I stood behind a courageous leader, or when I went along with it when someone was doing the right thing. But I also know well the feelings of doubt that come over me when the time comes for me to do the hard, right thing... and I have to do it alone.

Many of us know those feelings. But this story reminds me that when we follow the call of God and live our lives in the service of God and our neighbors, we are never alone. Elisha may have returned to face the Jordan the second time without Elijah there in person, but when he put the rolled up mantle of his master in the water, it parted just the same as it had before, and he walked back through on dry land because the God who guided Elijah and called Elisha to come after him, was there for the journey into the wilderness *and* the journey back home.

In our lives we can face a million Jordans, some large and some small. Starting a new school, kids leaving home, new jobs, new cities, new relationships... Sometimes these Jordans we face can seem impassable and overwhelming... Like admitting our failures and shortcomings, walking into our first recovery meeting, telling our truth in a counseling session, or saying goodbye to a loved one and trying to find a way to keep on living when we can't imagine life without them.

In today's reading the Jordan was a boundary separating the domesticated realm of the Kings of Israel and the chaos of wilderness where Yahweh lived to renew the prophets. Elijah crosses the Jordan and is taken up into heaven on a chariot of fire. Elisha crossed with him and solidified his calling as a prophet of Yahweh, Elijah's successor. It might have been easier for Elisha to stay in the wilderness, on the safer side of the Jordan, where there were no difficult truths to profess, none of God's justice to proclaim... but that wasn't his calling. So, he picks up the mantle and gets back to the work his master had begun.

We follow the same God, Yahweh, the God of Moses, Elijah, and Elisha. And our God has a habit of calling us forward to face Jordans of all kinds. Sometimes when we cross those Jordans we are headed toward the wilderness, and sometimes we cross them because we are headed back to work in our domesticated lives with the truth of God rooted deeply within us.

In the wilderness, where God meets us, we may discover truths about ourselves that are difficult to share with friends. We may sense a calling on our lives that changes our plans. Or we may be restored and rejuvenated so that we can go right back to what we were doing before.

But this kind of experience isn't only an individual engagement. We as a church, as a body of Christ in the world, we will face Jordan's together as we move forward. We will overcome challenges and discover new callings in the wilderness where God is waiting to restore us and remind us of our responsibility to be a prophetic witness of God's love in our world. Love that looks like feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising the dead. Love that looks like crossing over all kinds of boundaries to ensure that all of God's beloved are welcomed and cared for, no matter where they rank in the domesticated realm of our earthly Kingdoms.

Like Elisha who picked up the mantle of his master and bravely touched the waters of Jordan to return home and resume the work of God in the real world. You and I must pick up the mantle of Christ – in our individual lives and in our communal life – and bravely bring the good news that nourishes all people, heals all people, and welcomes all people into the love of God that is so desperately needed in our world.

The power is not in the mantle, it never was. The power is not in our former leaders, teachers, and mentors, it never was. The power is in the Spirit of God who meets us in the

wild, blesses us with a holy calling and renewed courage, and who walks with us as we face Jordans of all kinds, clearing the path and parting the waters so that we might walk forward on dry ground.