

On Not Looking Back  
II Kings 2:1-14  
Luke 9:51-62

“Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’”

The stories before us this morning could not be more relevant! In fact, I was so struck by their significance (not only for us but for John Wilkinson and Third Presbyterian Church) that I emailed John with my amazement. He wrote back saying that the associate minister preaching at Third Church this Sunday had already mentioned the lectionary’s uncanny coincidence to him. My email also included a link to a sermon entitled “The Stunning Outcome of a One-Person Search Committee,” preached by Walter Brueggemann on the occasion of Columbia Seminary’s calling of a new president. Walter chose the stories we just read and begins his sermon with two observations. “The work of some search committees,” he says,

is long, complicated and quite public, surrounded by many rumors and much intrigue. Other search committees operate quickly, quietly, rather like the judges at the Westminster Dog Show—one judge looks and points to the winner, and the dogs did not even know the process was going on. The case of Elijah as a search committee is of the latter type. Elijah’s decision is quick and terse, so terse that he does not say anything. He finds Elisha doing field work...and he throws his mantle over him. The choice is decisive; the deed is done irreversibly....No discussion, no negotiation, no terms of call.

I would add “no looking back” except that Elisha does ask Elijah for permission to go home and kiss his parents. Elijah grants Elisha’s request with words that underline the gravity of God’s claim upon Elisha’s life: “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” Next we read that Elisha has slaughtered his twelve yoke of oxen so that he could feast one last time with the people he was leaving behind. I imagine John, over the next few months, saying goodbye to the past and to his congregation, while we continue to do the same with each other. I also imagine a party being thrown at Third Presbyterian Church even as I am fairly certain the same will happen here. It is right and good to celebrate what has been.

But then. But then. Once the party is over and the predecessor taken up [to Maine, in this case, to Chestnut Hill, in John’s case; neither of us headed to heaven yet, I hope!], the journey that is Elisha’s life takes a whole new turn. Brueggemann reports that Elisha wrapped the prophetic mantle around himself, opened his future to the leading of God’s Spirit, and “never looked back! He [soon would be] blown by the wind into places he never thought to go, to enact things he had never thought to do.” This leads me to let you know that ministers no less than congregations must let go of the past. It is not easy! Every morning throughout my first year at Chestnut Hill, I would look at myself in the bathroom mirror and say, “You may *think* it, but do not let the words “when I was at Nassau Church in Princeton, we did thus and so” pass your lips!” I knew I would not be fit to be your minister if I looked back, even though I was not so fit at the beginning and did look back a lot. To be sure, this is not to say a minister leaves behind the knowledge, the gifts, the hard-won wisdom forged in the crucible of a previous call. If I had had half the gifts and experience John has when I started 24 years ago, I can barely imagine the places we might have gone and the mistakes I would NOT have made! Rather it is to say that a minister, no less than each of you, has been called to follow a living Lord, a following that entails a more radical break with the past than Elijah required of Elisha.

To understand how radical, we turn to the beginning of what is known as the Travel Narrative in Luke. From now until he is taken up, before he is taken from their sight, before he ascends, one of Jesus’ major concerns is the formation of disciples on the journey. The formation begins at the fork in the road where Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem. Not by chance, these verses in Luke both echo and eviscerate the Elisha call story.

An encounter in Samaria becomes Jesus’ the first “teaching moment” along the way. While most Jews heading toward Jerusalem took a detour around Samaria to avoid being taunted by the “anti-Jerusalem-centered salvation history Samaritans,” Jesus knew that rightly responding to rejection was a lesson every disciple needed to learn. As expected, the villagers are inhospitable toward Jesus, prompting the disciples to be inhospitable in return. They ask Jesus if they should command fire to come down from heaven and consume the Samaritans, just like Elijah had called down fire on the Baal worshippers of his time. So too, in the story just before this one, Jesus

says in response to John's offer to stop a man casting out demons in Jesus' name because he is not a follower of Jesus, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you." God knows that a lesson I learned in my first years here was how to deal with rejection graciously!

I think it is the case that the backward look of the church (and I would add, of nations) often coincides with rejecting a changing future and being inhospitable. Clearly the disciples as well as the early church had been formed by the past and so were looking back for their religious and moral cues. The same is so for the church today, especially in times of transition. Yet we come by our backward glance honestly! "We assume the Bible is all about the past," Peter Marty observes this month in the *Christian Century*, "ancient words and revelations waiting to be deciphered." Just so, Robert Jenson adds, "The God of the past rules our lives as he guarantees our securities, ...assigns our guilt...defends the status quo and provides a refuge when the status quo itself becomes too threatening....He is the Rock of Ages, the Sheltering Arms, the transcendent Security Blanket."

But here is the ironic thing about religion when it forms us by reinforcing our backward look: it teaches us, at the same time, to look inward. The word used for this in popular culture is *quest*: a solitary seeking after God who is hiding in the interstices of our consciousness or an ancient text or a spiritual practice. "The religious quest," Jens notes, "is regularly launched by some event in the world that makes us see the peril of our [being mortal] and suggests a refuge." Jesus has just set his face to go to Jerusalem and the disciples, in response to Jesus' impending departure, were looking back to Elijah as the guarantor of their security while beseeching the God of the Status Quo.

In response, Jesus simply turns, rebukes them and continues on the way. They can look back or follow—but not both! Three more teaching moments immediately present themselves, each having to do, in the words of Joel Green, with "a new web of relationships, [and] a transfer of allegiances...." While the disciples observe, a would-be disciple volunteers to follow Jesus wherever he goes. How did John put it last week? Most of the time, Jesus does the calling rather than us volunteering! Even so, Jesus does not reject her offer. He simply lets her know that she will be following a man who is homeless and so will become homeless, save for the home Jesus is making for her in God's love. Will she look back or take the first step? Then, with the next character, Jesus does the calling. The man agrees but asks permission first to bury his father. Like the woman, the man has a choice: go back and dig a grave or go ahead and proclaim God's reign. You cannot do both. It is a very hard choice! The last character, like the first, volunteers himself and then asks of Jesus what Elisha asked of Elijah: "...let me first say farewell to those at my house." Unlike Elijah, Jesus has no time for competing loyalties. Discipleship requires all three to make a radical break from past relationships and loyalties if it is Jesus they mean to follow.

Come to think of it, the future of this church's discipleship partakes of a kind of radical break in our relationship so that you do not look back but ahead to the living Lord who is always coming to you from out of the future God has already given you in him. "Our Lord," Jens goes on, "is a man framed by the same time and space as we; we are not called to seek him...because he is absent from time or hidden in time but [to follow him] because he comes toward us from the End of the very way through time that we are traveling. Our path, defined by 'God' as its goal, is not a quest but a *pilgrimage*...."

This is why Peter Marty says that if we assume the Bible is about the past, we are missing something. The Bible, he says, "is about the future, even when that future is challenging to discern. Ever since the women at the tomb learned that Jesus was 'going ahead of them to Galilee,' we've been trying to catch up." Likewise Jens says, "if Jesus were dead, following him would be the imitating of a figure of the past, and so self-defeating...only if he is alive, only if he is free to surprise us and upset all our imitations of what has been, is it possible to be his followers. Christian faith is not a matter of knowing about what Jesus did back there...; it is a matter of the promise made right now in the name of a living man, Jesus."

Brueggemann concludes that Jesus is an impatient search committee of one. I agree! Through his servant John, he will continue to call The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill to follow him into the future. Now is no time for looking back. He is, even now, journeying with his infants who are homeless, his toddlers who did not say goodbye to their mothers and fathers, his youth fleeing gangs, his parents who have not looked back because they are seeking a better country whose builder and maker is God! With no place to lay his head, Christ is in the camps and is calling you to follow him just there. "Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you devise, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire—that is the road you must take. To that [Christ] calls you and in that you must be [his] disciple." Thanks be to God.