

Let's give it one more shot: let's focus on this climactic final scene, this transitional scene in the history of Israel, as the great prophet Elijah mentors his disciple Elisha, prepares him to step up to accept the responsibility to which God has called him. We've been taking the panoramic view these past two Sundays; this morning let's zoom in on Elisha's decisive moment on the banks of the Jordan. Then on the decisive moments confronting us.

Elisha was minding his own business, farming his fields, when Elijah threw his mantle over his shoulders. Elisha had just a moment to decide: "Yes, I will follow you." He accepted a ministry, a mentorship of 3 years—a familiar period—of being a disciple, being trained, prepared, taught—and then another pivotal moment came.

Our reading picked up here: his mentor, Elijah, takes Elisha on a final tour. His last act is to take his mantle, strike the water with it, and they both cross over on dry ground (right thru the diverted Jordan.) By a mighty act of God, the waters part.

But that's not the main point: the point, for Elisha, for each of us in our various moments of decision, is to trust or not trust. When it's our turn, do we stand there or do we move ahead in the ways in which we've been trained, prepared?

All this scenario is the panoramic shot: it's Elisha's turn to do the exact same thing. (On the opposite side of the river stand the 50 spectators, pretenders, watching to see what Elisha will do next.) Elisha knows his task can be done; he's just seen Elijah do it. (We all know mighty things, faithful things, breakthrough things (big or small) can be done; we've seen others do them. The problem is that *we're* not, *I'm* not, always sure *I* can do them. We have been well mentored, well taught: the question is always arising: shall I be a spectator, or shall I step out and act in faith?

The camera lens, at this moment of decision, catches Elisha throwing up a lukewarm, mixed message sort of prayer "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" (but at least he prays!) and...here goes...he smacks the water, just as he had seen modeled, and it divides, and he too "walks across on dry ground."

But now let's use this camera lens differently: like a slow motion camera catching how the magician pulls the rabbit out of his hat (if we slow it down, break it down, the apparently miraculous is often explained:) what factors allow Elisha to be so trusting, so bold? Why is he able to act as he does? [For the more competitive among us: how are we able to separate ourselves from those pretenders; create some space between us and the spiritual "peloton"?] How, and why, do "miracles of faith" happen? What stops us from accepting God's mantle for each of us; how is it we may step forward in trust? As persons, as a church? What's the big difference between Elisha and those 50 spectators?

In that moment, Elisha reaches down, smacks the water...What resources does Elisha have on his side; what factors have gotten him to that freeze frame, with the waters parting "miraculously?"

For one thing, Elisha has just seen Elijah do the same thing. Elisha not asked to do something impossible—no: seeing what can be done changes our definition of "impossible." A follower of Jesus is asked to do the impossible—yet we see others going before us, doing the impossible, and it becomes possible. (This building we enjoy, paid for. Would it be possible? Many small groups to enter into. A manse. An active Youth

Ministry, enough children to be creating space problems for us.) Fantastic music ministry. Have you allowed God to renew your marriage, change the focus of your life, the quality of your heart? Not yet? See Elisha...See Jesus!)

Anyway Elijah doesn't tell Elisha, "Adios, you're on your own, sink or swim, maybe you'll get lucky, maybe not, good luck!"—He asks Elisha to do no more than what he has witnessed, what he can perform with and thru the Spirit of God—the same Spirit so powerful in Elijah.

For another thing, Elisha understood he didn't have to be certain, didn't have to "be successful"—only faithful. He had no way of knowing, any more than you or I would, what would happen when he rapped the waters with his mantle—yet he did it anyway. His prayer was not by any means "wired", it was no sure thing: "Where is the LORD, the God of Israel?" But he prayed; he relied upon God, and he moved ahead as best he knew. No excuses. The spectators over on the safe side would never have prayed, or would have waited until their prayer was perfectly certain: "How do I know God answers my prayers? I don't hear God. How do I know what God wants me to do?"—and would therefore never have taken the action at all. God honors our faithful efforts, the prayers we do pray, the steps we do take—not the steps we fail to take for fear. And sometimes, as you all know, we move ahead and the waters fail to part. Oh, well. So what? Sometimes we get it wrong. But if you were God, and one of your children made a point of trying to obey you, and to please you, and kept trusting that You were asking her to do big things, and kept praying and risking in order to try to be obedient—how long would you let her keep drilling dry holes? God won't long stay idle in the face of our obedient zeal—either there will be new learning, or new results—but we're ahead in either case, as long as we're striving to be faithful.

At that moment he's required to make his pivotal decision, Elisha also benefits from the "momentum of obedience." Each right decision we make prepares us better for the next one. (I hesitate to say "makes the next one easier—" often the lessons only get more advanced!) But imagine Elisha losing his nerve, forgetting the faithfulness of God right there available to him as he bends down over the Jordan...but what is his choice? "I guess I'll go back to the farm? Oh yeah, maybe not—we've already barbequed the oxen—I have nothing to go back to!" A bit of a disincentive. The further ahead we move in obedience with the Spirit, the more incentives we have to keep moving forward, the harder it gets to slide backward. [President William Frederick Few, from 1896-1940 professor then long-term President at Trinity College/Duke University—admired, respected, faithful pillar of Methodist Church, 39 years in a row at Methodist Convention (responsible for Duke's "Learning and Religion" motto, which his life modeled.) When asked why he decided one Sunday morning to walk thru a summer storm to go worship God: "I didn't decide this morning; I decided 40 years ago."]

You probably didn't decide this morning; some of you made a commitment nine years ago to worship God every Sunday within 30 mile radius. Some of you made a commitment last November to be here this morning when you submitted your 2006 covenant. It was hard to risk an entire weekend on a Men's Retreat with a bunch of men who've nothing better to do than church stuff—not a promising sign for a group of guys—and now dozens of you men wouldn't miss it for anything.

Although the narrative zoom lens focuses on this moment at the Jordan, Elisha did not just show up and get lucky; he had been observing, practicing, preparing; mentored

by Elijah for perhaps 3 years [1 Kings 22:1]. He was willing to move ahead—full speed ahead!—trusting in God, before he was absolutely certain of the outcome. (First with the oxen—then at the Jordan.) He recalled that he had been well mentored, and was being asked to do no more than he had himself witnessed. (This didn't make it easy for him—but possible—and then inevitable, as he relied upon the Spirit of God.) That one major decision, to be ready to look the fool or to be shown to be faithful, was made easier by all the other obedient decisions he had already made leading up to it.

You and I, disciplined by another Teacher, also enjoy each of these advantages in our pilgrimage of faith. But we enjoy some additional ones, also. Our Teacher, our Rabbi, our Master, our Mentor, is the Lord Jesus. (By the way: I believe the same principle, the same “zoom lens” approach we have applied to Elisha also applies to Jesus. What the gospels record, in shorthand, as signs of power, “miracles,” are never magic. (Mark is honest enough to tell us Jesus could do no deeds of power in his hometown due to their lack of faith (well, maybe a few small ones... Mk 6:5.) There are trust and faith in the Father, and prayer, and abiding in the Holy Spirit, behind each of the astounding deeds Jesus performed.

[[One of the shortcomings of the traditional orthodox Christian understanding of Jesus as the Son of God, the second Person of God the Trinity, is that it may make it easy for us to assume that since Jesus was somehow God and we are not, then what He accomplished is not possible for us: “Duh: He was God. Don't ask me to move mountains or riverbeds, to heal the lame, to preach the gospel.” But no: behind the divine power available to Jesus is always the prayer, the connection, the obedience: the exact same divine resources available to each of us. This is why even in the gospel of John Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in Me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” [and because the Father will send the Spirit in My place. John 14:12]]

We do not see Jesus face to face as Elisha saw Elijah, but we have the gospels, the Scriptures, the historical record of 2000 years of faithful Christians; the blood of 140,000 martyrs put to death for their faith in Him last year alone. Elisha had a great mentor, but not Jesus, and he did not enjoy these benefits.

(Elijah surely understood, as Jesus did later, that the purpose of the teacher is to prepare his disciples to accept their assignment—but then also to teach them likewise to become the mentors, to teach others. We are taught in order to become teachers; *blessed to be a blessing*. It doesn't end with us; the life of faith is not “all about me” or “all about our church.” Jesus knew His life and ministry would have meant little had He not mentored His twelve and sent the Holy Spirit to accompany them and all the rest of His disciples. His ministry would have come to little because after a generation or two the memories of His gospel and His life would have died out. His Church is every generation, every day, choosing to look from the past to the future, empowered forward by His Spirit. His Church, His local congregations, are continually standing at the banks of the Jordan confronted with Elisha's choice: to be spectators or participants? To risk obeying and looking foolish, or “play it safe”?)

Unlike Elisha, we live on this side of the Day of Pentecost: His Holy Spirit has already been poured out upon all the earth, and is continually available to us. When we pray, God the Holy Spirit is listening to us and speaking to us. When we don't know just

how to pray, and the words don't come out just right, or at all, God the Spirit intercedes. When we are frustrated that we cannot see Jesus directly in this lifetime—the price of admission seems to be you have to die first, one way or another—His Spirit will heal our hurting places, our questioning places. When we do not see the way forward, His Spirit will light our Path, our next step. When we claim not to know His will for us or His presence, His Spirit will call our bluff. When our most heartfelt prayer sounds no stronger than “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” the Spirit is there to magnify our faltering faith into trust and then action. When our heart grows hard and we are content with our lot in life, content to close our ears to the cries of those in need, content to enjoy our church as we are this day, just us and our friends, (as if it were all about us) the Spirit will work to turn our hearts of stone again into hearts of flesh.

Elisha was singled out by Elijah, called by God, for a very high and prominent position—Head Prophet over all the prophets, all the land. For what have you been called by God? Is it to a high and prominent position, or is it to a new attitude of service? Is it to a dramatic career change and a relocation, or is it to a change of heart—to new generosity, to redefinition of your priorities, to redeployment of your resources? (Sometimes a truly new, God-inspired attitude toward your career or spouse or children or parents is more miraculous than a call to be a missionary overseas.) For what moment in your life, for what parting of the Jordan River have you been mentored and prepared? For what purpose have we as a congregation, a church family, been called by God? Jesus has sent us His Spirit and we here in 2006 in Corona del Mar have the great privilege of listening and obeying.

(To what God is calling you is between you and the Holy Spirit of God. Exactly how the Spirit is nudging you, or shouting at you, to step out of the pack of spectators and onto the banks of the Jordan, there to whack the waters and move on thru, I don't know. (God knows I have my hands full trying to be obedient to my own calling, my own personal assignments. Don't worry: God hasn't forgotten any of us; none of us was created or converted to Christ in order to be overlooked, set aside, as a spectator! God has a personal assignment for you, beginning today. There was just one Elisha, doing miracles all over the place—but others called to encourage him, to provide him lodging, to pay for his new sandals, to tell others about his mighty deeds, to be part of his team in diverse ways. Something like Christ's Church. If you're really not sure what your God-given role is, or if you claim you're not hearing so well, my guess is that you're pretending to listen with your ears at the banks of the Jordan while you're actually filing permits to build over there on the spectator side where it's safe and dry and a lot more nicely populated. That's one of my strategies, anyway.)

All that said, the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ is very clear, for those with ears to hear, as to the primary calling of Christ's Church. The gospels broadcast the one same assignment, but in stereo: in the Gospel of Matthew, it's “Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [28:18-20] For Luke, it's “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” [Acts 1:8] The Gospel of John records, “Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father

has sent Me, exactly so I send you." When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." [20:21]

I appreciate the particular style in which you, this church, respond to this element of God's assignment to us. Our calling as a church is to go forth in His name, for His sake, as guided by His Spirit, to be witnesses to Jesus, and to keep making new disciples. Saddleback and Mariners' respond in their own fashions (thank God for the vast impact they are having in the lives of tens of thousands of people, changing the face of Orange County and the world for the better, in Christ's name.) But we are not called to be like any other congregation—but, as you know, to be this faithful congregation.

I suspect most of us have friends just like we, ourselves: friends who may not get involved, prosper, learn, trust, grow, in a very large-scale operation. Lots of us have friends who are wary about religion, thoughtful in their doubts, careful before giving away their affections and their loyalties. Friends whose level of doubt and questioning outran the answers they were offered at some point in the past, and they called doubletalk by its name—but then quit the quest. I'll bet you have friends who are willing to dig deep, to wrestle with the Bible and the Spirit, to stay on the Path for the long haul.

We have friends who are living life as spectators—even, paradoxically, as the rat race has them exhausted. Some of us have friends with young children who are eager to find a place where their children may receive some spiritual grounding even if the parents think they're not very interested. Many of us have friends who've had enough of "relationships" but yearn for some genuine friendships. Most of us know people whose lives are going great—but who have no anchor for coping when storms come and upset their plans. We all know people who claim to be "spiritual" —just as many of us used to claim—while confident they have no use for church. (We are no better than our friends—simply recognized our deepest needs, were desperate enough to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd sooner, perhaps.)

Every one of us has friends loved by Jesus all the way to the cross—friends who wouldn't walk across PCH from Starbucks to worship Him—but who experience pain and need, who long to experience His forgiveness, His mercy, His love. Our job is not to wrestle them in here, not to get slick in the ways of the world with a new Evangelism campaign so our neighbors and friends confuse us for yet one more worldly ripoff scheme—but to keep being Christ's Church, His agents, His missionaries as each of you uniquely does. To pray for discernment and courage, to go forth to proclaim the good news, to keep making disciples in ways respectful and loving and creative and costly. To rearrange our schedules as we choose our six, our three, our one Elisha; to keep growing as the Church Jesus wants us to keep becoming.

That moment before Elisha was called by Elijah, he was content enough plowing his field. Elijah had prayed, and then he went forth and issued to Elisha God's invitation. He didn't even bother to wait to hear the answer—he kept walking. Elisha was waiting so eagerly to live his life for God—yet he hadn't even known it. He probably thought he'd be looking at oxen hindquarters the rest of his life—until it all changed in a moment, when the "man of God," the person of prayer and obedience, invited him.

Elisha then learned from his mentor until his turn came, his moment of decision came, following a string of prior decisions. All the other "yeses" he had already said to God helped him be ready for that dramatic "yes" at the Jordan. And from that "yes," Elisha went on to defeat armies, to feed multitudes, to raise the dead, to save cities.

“The one who believes in Me will do greater works than I do, because I am going on to be with the Father, and the Spirit will be with you all...”

## **2 Kings 2:1-15**

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.

Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. 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." As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.

Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.