

Here and Now  
 2 Kings 2:1-12 || Kings 2:1-12  
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May the God who creates us...

Good Morning!

Are you feeling as if there is precious little over which you have control? Do you have a sense that this COVID crisis has become chronic and it's all gone on long enough? Are you feeling pummeled and distracted by the news, afraid if you don't check it hourly you'll miss something major, like our Capital being overrun?

I find myself antagonized by the past and ambivalent about the future.

St. Augustine said, "We are forced to act within a tiny window of time—the present—since the past is unrecoverable and the future is not yet available." Biblical theologian William Loyd Allen says, "In a sense we act-- in between what was-- and what will be."

I would add that our actions coupled with God's Spirit determine the future world. Our actions coupled with God's Spirit determine the future world. We act in the now, aware or ignorant of what has been, to create what can be.

This morning's piece from the Hebrew Bible, is a story of a frozen moment in time, a description of a moment of transition, it's a story of two prophets of old who may give us a handle on how to deal with now.

"I swear by God,  
 I swear by you,  
 I will not leave you."

Three times, over and over again, says the young prophet Elisha, to his mentor Elijah  
 "I swear by God and I swear by you, I will not leave you."

The prophet Elijah arises in a chaotic time in the Israelites' history. King David's grandson has been replaced with a prominent revolutionary named Jeroboam. The twelve tribes of the Israelites have split: ten form the sovereign nation of Israel and two the nation of Judah.

Political expediency eclipses practical theology, and eventually the King of Israel marries his son Ahab to the Phoenician Princess, Jezebel. (You'll know how well these two fared in biblical history, by the number of children we now see named Ahab and Jezebel...) Wasn't pretty.

Jezebel worshipped Baal and introduced that pagan practice into the royal court in Israel. Not only did she worship Baal, She zealously began to push out the God of

Abraham, Sarah. It is then, in this time, long about 869 BCE that the prophet Elijah arises to condemn this idolatry and call the people of Israel back to YHWH, the one true God, the God who spoke to Moses and rescues the Israelites from slavery.

Much, much ensues between Elijah's appearance on the scene and where we pick up today, I'm not going to cover it, but I invite you to sit down and take a tour through portions of the second book of Kings and take in the full saga of the prophet Elijah.

"I swear by God and I swear by me, that I will not leave you," says Elisha to Elijah on what he has been told will be his mentor's last day on earth. Elisha's mentor Elijah has taught him all he knows, he called him to YHWH's service. He is bereft at the thought that he may be left alone.

Yet, as they walk that day together Elijah wants Elisha to leave him alone, three times he says, "Leave me be. Stay here while I travel away" But each time Elisha refuses. Finally in deep frustration Elijah says to Elisha, "Ok fine, tell me what you want of me, before I leave you."

Elisha faces Elijah, I imagine him swallowing and turning to his mentor, his hero, a person who is way more than life and saying, "I want to inherit a double portion of your spirit, your powers, your ways in the world." Elisha must be thinking "I need all of you and then some to carry on, because who knows what the future may bring."

Elijah is, I think, taken aback, but also maybe even encouraged by his protégé's hutzpah. He replies slowly, "That's a hard thing to give, but if you see me leave than you will inherit a double portion."

Just then Elisha looks up and sees chariots of fire carry Elijah away. The past of Elijah, with Elijah's work and prophecy is gone, the future of Elisha ministry has not yet begun. It is a moment, a frozen moment in time of now.

So, what? What does this have to say to us, here and now, almost a year into this world of COVID-19?

Dare I say that we, like Elisha are in that "between time". A year ago, I thought that we would be done with this pandemic by now. Sure the one in 1917 lasted two years, but good Lord, look how much more we know about science now, this couldn't possibly last two years like that one did.

Yet even with the vaccines making their way into our lives, I believe we have a ways to go; I fear perhaps even a long ways to go.

We are in that time between time. Like Elisha we want an assurance that we can carry on. We want to know that all we have invested thus far, will not be for nothing. We want to know that we can get through this, that we can survive. We want to know that God will still be with us. We want a double portion of God's holiness to see us through.

We can lament what we did or didn't do right over these past twelve months, we can blame inept government officials, shortsighted, self-absorbed individuals and conspiracy theory adherents for our current predicament or we can move on. We can pivot, we can turn our heads from what has been and stay firmly committed to the task at hand, not wavering, not turning away from the difficult decisions of today so that we can inform and create the hope of our future; If we can focus on the now, the present.

Elijah didn't want Elisha to see him leave this world. To witness his vulnerability as he departed with not all that he had hoped for finished. So he desperately tries to get Elisha to turn away, to leave him. To not focus on the now.

The random groups of prophets along the side of the road that Elisha and Elijah keep encountering also seem to be there just to distract Elisha from this moment, from this day.

Over and over again as Elijah and Elisha walk by, they call out to Elisha, "Today your master will be taken away. Did you know? Did you hear? He's going to be taken away." And each time they call to Elisha he resists the urge, the temptation to turn to them and gossip and chat and lament all that is happening. Instead, he says to them, "Yes I know. Keep silent!"

In our world and in our context I liken these bands of roving prophets to the sirens of Facebook, Instagram, and news app notifications that are pinging continually on my phone. Trying to pull me, (usually successfully) from the here and now, with the allure of news I do not yet know. When, for the most part I'd do better, to be more like Elisha and say to my phone and all that distracts me, say to them, "Yes, I know. Keep silent!"

What am I doing now, here with you. Now—this time, this place, this moment, this is my focus.

Friends, we are living in a drippingly difficult time that has been wearing away the sandstone of our lives and our world as we once knew it. It makes perfect sense that we are mad about the past and long to know about the future. But here is where we are. And our actions now, here, being attuned to the drips and drops of the present, putting our umbrellas up where we can, is what will enable us to eventually move to what is next.

We can do this, for the more attentive we are to the now, the more likely we will see the Spirit of God acting, caring and coursing through our lives. As we see that spirit, even though we are shredded with grief and sadness, as we see that spirit we will know that we are not alone, that God has promised from the beginning of time to be with us always and our God is here with us now.

Amen.