

On this Last Sunday after the Epiphany, our Gospel lesson is always about the Transfiguration. It's a transitional moment in the Gospels. Jesus is preparing to head to Jerusalem for his Passion. He's trying to prepare his disciples for what is about to happen: his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. And every year I preach about the Transfiguration.

But this year I want to look at one of our other lessons. It also is about one of the figures involved in the Transfiguration, namely the prophet Elijah. And it also is about a transition—Elijah preparing Elisha to be his successor.

Transitions are a part of the reality of our lives. It goes with the territory. Children grow. Parents age. You age. Friends move away. You change jobs. That's reality. We have transitions going on right now at St. Paul's. Kathi has stepped down after being here for 2 decades. We've had long time members move in the past year. We have a number of new folks joining us. Things are changing around us.

In life, transitions are a given. At a fundamental level, transitions are built into the system. All of us have finite life spans. All of us have received things from the generations before us. Money. Property. Knowledge. Political structures. And all of us will eventually pass them on to the generations that follow us. That's the way life works. You can't take it with you. You hand things off to succeeding generations.

The constant question before us is how do we deal with change? What would God have us do in times of change? This morning, we heard one of the greatest transition stories in scripture, the transition between Elijah and Elisha. It's found in Second Kings, ch2. I want to take a close look at the transition between Elijah and Elisha, because there are some good lessons for all of us as we deal with changes in our own lives.

Elijah was quite a character, and he'd be a tough act for anyone to follow. God's power was with him in a very special way. In fact, he is usually regarded as the greatest of the Jewish prophets.

Elijah spent much of his career opposing the apostate King Ahab and his pagan wife, Jezebel. Back in ch18 of 1Kings, he stood toe to toe with 450 prophets of Baal in a spiritual contest.

After Elijah won that contest, Jezebel took out a contract on him, and he had to flee for his life. In the next chapter, Elijah was depressed and dejected in the desert. But God miraculously sustained him. God called to resume his prophetic ministry. And God sent him to anoint Elisha to be his disciple and his successor.

Elisha was out plowing in his field when Elijah called him. That day Elisha left behind everything he had in order to follow Elijah. He took the wood of the plow and the yoke and built a fire. Then he boiled up the oxen he was plowing with and gave the meat to the people around him. You might say that he literally liquidated his assets.

Then Elisha began following Elijah. He became Elijah's servant, attendant, disciple, and heir apparent

And that's where we pick up with our story in today's OT lesson in 2Kings ch2. We are told that the Lord is about to take Elijah up to heaven. That means that Elisha is about to lose his teacher and mentor. This is going to be a stressful time for Elisha. Stress often brings out people's true nature. Stress is often a test of character. The way Elisha responds is instructive.

First, as Elijah is heading off, he tells Elisha to stay behind. "Stay here. The Lord has told me to go to Bethel." He says it again: "Stay here. The Lord has told sent me to Jericho." And a third time he says, "Stay here. The Lord has told me to go to the Jordan River."

Three times Elijah tells Elisha to wait. This is something of a test. Elijah has been grooming Elisha. Now the question is hanging out there: will Elisha persevere in carrying on Elijah's work? Will Elisha be as good in a marathon as he is in the 100 yard dash? Will he follow through?

So Elijah gives Elisha three outs, three chances to throw in the towel. But three times, Elisha responds with bulldog tenacity. Three times, his reply is the same: "As surely as the Lord lives, I will never leave you."

And that's Lesson #1 for us. Sometimes the most important thing you can do is just hang in there. Persevere. Don't bail out.

In our relationship with God, and in our relationships with each other, there are times we are tempted to chunk it all, throw up our hands and leave. This is especially common in times of change. When you're uncomfortable with change, the natural tendency is to push the eject button. If things aren't going your way, leave. If things get too painful, don't deal with them. But the example of Elisha is, persevere. Persist. Hang in there. Stick with it. Don't take the easy way out.

So Elisha follows Elijah on his journey. They come to the river Jordan. Often in scripture, the Jordan is something of an obstacle.

But, Elijah calls upon God's power for help. He rolls up his cloak like a staff, and he strikes the water of the Jordan. And God divides the river for them. Elijah and Elisha walk through to the other side. Just like Moses at the Red Sea, and just like Joshua at the Jordan, God removes the obstacle from the 2 prophets' path.

And this is Lesson #2 for us. There are obstacles in life. These obstacles often are present in times of change. There will be things that impede us that we have no power over. There may be problems that seem insurmountable. It's important in these situations for us to be ready to ask for God's help. Though we are often powerless, God is powerful. We always need to ask his help.

Then Elijah and Elisha reach the opposite shore of the river. There Elijah turns to Elisha and says, "What may I do for you before I am taken away?" There are two important

lessons here. Elijah realizes that his time is short. He knows he's not indispensable. He knows he will be leaving. But with the time he has, he tries to be as helpful as possible. "What can I do for you before I am taken away?"

This is Lesson #3 for us. All of us have finite life spans. We will not be here forever. So in the time we are given, we are called to make the most of it. Even as Elijah's time is nearly up, he's still asking how he can be helpful. Elijah is trying to make every minute count. None of us can do everything. But all of us can do something. And this is especially important in times of change. Don't be paralyzed by change. Do what you can, while you can still do it.

And this is closely related to lesson #4. Elijah is doing the best he can to prepare his successor. None of us can do a job forever. We may do it for 30 or 40 years. But eventually, we'll have to pass it on to someone else. Thus we always need to be looking for ways to train our successors. We may only see the beginnings of change. We may only catch glimmers and glimpses of what our successors will experience in all its fullness. But it's still our job to continually prepare them as best we can.

Elijah continues to do these things, even up the last minute. Elijah asks, "What can I do for you?" Elisha answers, "Give me a double portion of your Spirit."

This doesn't mean that Elisha wants twice the amount of the Holy Spirit that Elijah has. Instead it has to do with inheritance. In that culture, when a father would die, the oldest son, the first-born son, would take over the family. And when the property was divided up amongst the sons, the oldest would get a double portion. So what Elisha is asking for here is to be Elijah's successor, his spiritual oldest son, the new leader of the group of the prophets.

Elijah replies that Elisha has asked a hard thing. After all, the Holy Spirit is not Elijah's to give. It is, instead, a gift from God. But he does tell Elisha prophetically that if God lets him see his departure, the gift of the Spirit will be given. And sure enough, as they're speaking, Elijah and Elisha are suddenly separated by horses and chariots of fire, members of God's angelic army. And then Elijah is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. And because Elisha is allowed to witness Elijah's departure, it is a sign that he will indeed be Elijah's successor.

And as Elijah is being carried away, notice Elisha. He doesn't rub his hands together and say, "Oh yeah! I'm in charge now!" Instead, Elisha tears his clothes in mourning and cries out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel its horsemen!"

First of all he is mourning the loss of Elijah like a father. Second, he is giving Elijah an important title: 'The Chariots and Charioteers of Israel.' He's not talking about the fiery chariots. Instead he is saying that Elijah is as important to Israel as their chariots are.

That takes a bit of cultural unpacking. Chariots were the #1 high tech weapon of the day. A country's chariots were their most important defense. By calling Elijah "Israel's Chariots and its Horsemen," Elisha is making a profound statement. He's saying that the real defense of Israel lies in following God, as Elijah did.

And that's Lesson #5 for us. A good military defense may be important for a country. Keeping borders secure might be a good thing. But the ultimate defense is being obedient to God's Holy Spirit, as Elijah was. Following God is far more important than anything else.

Our lesson ends there. But I want to go a couple verses farther. Because, after Elijah is taken up, Elisha still has one last chance to bail out. But instead, he picks up Elijah's mantle, his outer robe, which is laying on the ground. This is wonderfully symbolic. By taking up Elijah's robe, he is taking up Elijah's role. And then he, Elisha, uses Elijah's mantle to again part the waters of the Jordan.

The transfer of power is complete. The Spirit and Power of God now rest on Elisha, empowering him for ministry. And it will be Elisha's job to serve as prophet through further times of transition in Israel's history.

Change is a given in life. Don't let it overwhelm you. Remember the lessons from the story of Elijah and Elisha:

1. Don't run away from change, hang in there, and persevere when you're tempted to bail out.
2. When you hit obstacles or when problems seem insurmountable, always ask for God's help.
3. Make the most of the time God gives you to do as much as you can.
4. Be ready to groom others to follow in your footsteps.
5. Remember that your ultimate security, your ultimate defense in times of change is following the Living God.

God won't shield us from change. But he does promise to be with us in times of change.

Trust his power. Trust his presence.