

Easier Said than Done

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

I must have heard that a hundred times as a kid... you probably did too. And... I'm always amazed when I hear a story about someone who decided at age seven that she was going to be a veterinarian or an astronaut or a marine biologist—and then went on to do exactly that. It's actually a little scary... We don't expect seven-year-olds to have that kind of discernment. At that age, I wanted to be an Army guy.... or maybe a ballet dancer... or possibly a spy.

A few years later, with some school behind me and an idea of what I might possibly be genuinely good at, I decided to be a great physicist. No run-of-the-mill physicist, mind you—I intended to be right up there with Albert Einstein. Somehow I managed to ignore the part about it taking 10 years or so of Math...

The point is... before we ever really do something with our lives we have to first imagine ourselves in that role... after that, we can begin to prepare in more concrete ways—by acquiring training, making the necessary contacts, and doing practical exercises. Today we generally do this in school, but up until about a century ago, the accepted way of gaining expertise in most professions was to become an apprentice to someone else and then learn the necessary skills through on-the-job training.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, we look at just such an apprentice as the time approaches to “graduate” and go out on his own. As our story opens, Elisha has been the apprentice of Elijah for some time.

Now... we all know all about Elijah—Elijah was HUGE. Today we heard that he went away in a chariot of fire—one of only two biblical figures who never faced earthly death. Elijah is the one expected to return and occupy the empty seat left at every Seder meal—the prophet who appeared with Moses at the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. This is the guy who faced up to King Ahab, Queen Jezebel and the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel...

Elijah ... was larger than life.

But even larger-than-life characters have their weaknesses, and Elijah was no exception. When Jezebel vowed to kill him following the big showdown on Mount Carmel, Elijah ran away and eventually camped out in a cave on Mount Horeb (a.k.a. Mount Sinai). Enough was enough... he was totally burned out and ready to quit... convinced that he was alone in the fight, that no one else was committed to following God's will. But God knew better... God had an orderly succession plan—Elisha would be anointed as his apprentice, and would eventually become prophet in his place.

So Elijah did as he was told... he went and found Elisha who was busy plowing a field. Elijah threw his symbol of authority—his mantle—over Elisha's shoulders and Elisha, recognizing that remaining a farmer was not in his future, began to imagine himself in a new role. In short order he butchered his yoke of oxen, built a fire with the yoke and plow, threw his own farewell feast, and set out to become the prophet's apprentice.

And now that apprenticeship is ending—it's time for Elisha to take on the authority... and the responsibility of actually being the prophet—college is over; it's time to get a real job. The Bible never

really tells us exactly how long he had been training but I think it's fairly obvious that although Elijah was ready to go, Elisha didn't feel ready to say goodbye. And so he did what any of us would do... he hung on.

In fact, in verses 3 through 5—the ones we skipped over in today's lesson—we find Elisha, traveling along in a state of utter denial: in Bethel, a group of prophets said to him, "You know that today the LORD will take your master away from you, right?" And he said, "La-la-la-la-lalala... I'm not listening... lalalalala..." And the same thing happened in Jericho. And again... "I don't-wanna-hear-it—I'm not listening ... La-la-la-la-lalala..."

I can identify.

But like or not, no amount of personal denial was going to change the reality of God's plan. In fact, whether he could see it in himself or not, Elisha had grown up. He was equipped for the job at hand. He really was ready to be the prophet... but he needed one more assurance that God would have his back. So when Elijah said, "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."

Now, in those days, a father would divide his inheritance—whatever he had to pass along to his sons—into equal parts, with the number of parts equal to the number of sons plus one. Then he would give the firstborn son two parts and every other son one part. So in this passage, Elisha is asking for the double-portion of the inheritance that is the right of the firstborn son.

But Elisha wasn't asking for material wealth—not riches or land or title—what he wanted was a spiritual inheritance... a double share of Elijah's spirit. And this is a pretty big thing to ask—because as we have seen in the chapters preceding this, Elijah's spirit gave him great power: power to stop the rain, power to face up to kings, power over death itself.

Now, Elijah knew that Elisha was asking for a gift that he did not have the authority to promise. He knew the power he was able to wield was never truly his. He had power only because he was acting as God's agent. Yes, it's true God had selected Elisha to succeed him, but God had never shared the details of the plan—and only God can grant Elisha's wish for spiritual authority. So Elijah responds in a way that will leave the decision in God's hands: "If you see me as I am being taken...it will be granted."

Hold that thought... let's turn our attention for a moment to our New Testament lesson.

The Gospel of Luke generally paints a portrait of Jesus that is kinder, gentler and less controversial than we find in the other Gospels. Luke alone gives us of the Angel Gabriel, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. The poet Dante described him as "the scribe of the gentleness of Christ,"¹ and Raymond Brown said: "more than any other evangelist Luke has given the world a Jesus to love."²

The Jesus we meet in this passage is not that Jesus.

This Jesus knows, like Elijah, that it is time for him to be "taken up," but unlike Elijah, for him there will be no whirlwind... no escape from earthy death. So perhaps it's not very surprising that this Jesus has an utterly no-nonsense approach to succession planning. This Jesus is done collecting followers who love his words and are thrilled by his charismatic leadership, but who have no idea what it means to really be a disciple. This Jesus wants real disciples—leaders who are prepared to accept the awesome responsibility of spreading the gospel and growing the kingdom after he is no longer among them in the flesh.

Of course we know how these stories turn out...

All of the eager, would-be-followers of Jesus in the Luke passage cite compelling personal circumstances and then turn back. But we know the truth: the cost of true discipleship is too great for them to bear. Like children playing at being soldiers or ballerinas or spies, they might have imagined themselves in the role, but when it came right down to it, they didn't follow through.

By contrast, Elisha does see Elijah taken up in the whirlwind. In awe he watches until his mentor is just a speck in the distance... and then... indulging in a moment of pure grief, he tears his own clothing in despair...

...and then he picks up Elijah's ... no, he picks up his mantle, calls upon God for support, and goes to work.

Discipleship is one of those things that's always easier said than done—and that's true no matter what God has called you to do. Elisha had some very big shoes to fill—it's no wonder he was nervous about getting started. But I tell you—it's also not very easy to walk up in front of this congregation with everybody watching and try to light a tiny wick way above your head with a candlelighter that's as tall as you are!

We're not all called to stand up to kings and deliver prophetic messages. But we can all perform miracles. It's a miracle when a homeless man is fed, and volunteers at Miriam's kitchen do that every morning—is God calling you to join them? It's a miracle when a child grows into faith—maybe you could teach Sunday School. It's a miracle when those who need help are cared for—have you considered being a Deacon or a Stephen Minister? It's a miracle when someone on the outside comes in to the community of Christ—have you invited a neighbor to church lately? God calls each of us to serve, and we must each decide, individually, how to respond. Will we find excuses?

Or will we take up the mantle and get to work?

So may it be. Amen.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 267.

² Ibid.