

Looking at Nothing

Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Lent. The Sunday before Lent always presents the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, and today we also have the story of Elijah's departure in a whirlwind.

Before a difficult journey, it is helpful to take inventory – to be reassured that there are resources available to sustain the travellers.

Elisha needed a powerful demonstration to commence his journey as THE prophet replacing Elijah.

Jesus' ministry was launched with God's amen at his baptism, and when events were becoming more challenging, God reinforced the affirmation with the transfiguration.

Lent, if we fully engage ourselves, can be a difficult experience, and so,before we begin, it is good to take inventory – to be reminded of God's power, presence and activity in the world. We attempt to do just that with these two stories.

We probably need to be reminded again that the Hebrews (which includes Jesus and his disciples) didn't normally make statements about what they believed,.....such as, "I believe Elijah was God's chosen prophet," or "I believe Jesus was the Messiah."
Instead, they told stories to communicate their beliefs.

Actually, it is almost impossible to describe **with adjectives**: intense feelings, the supernatural or any extreme experience.

Declaring "God is very huge or awesome or omnipresent..... just doesn't adequately get the point across.

Similes, metaphors and stories do a much better job at presenting the truth in the extraordinary.

I've been fortunate to see and survive six tornadoes, and one was an F5. To describe the F5 as big and black fails to communicate the sense of power – the truth in the experience.

Likewise, it makes sense to describe an intense, extraordinary, holy moment with images of flaming chariots and a tornado.....because that is what was experienced.

The story in our text of 2 Kings is about Elijah's and Elisha's encounter with a whirlwind.
[I'll try to enunciate clearly.... ..differentiate .. Elijah, Elisha.]

Elijah was the great prophet during the reign of King Ahab of Israel, and Elijah was the mentor to his apprentice and Elisha.

It was the time of prophets,.... when people saw visions..... sensed the activity of God, and spoke FOR God..... and SAW GOD.

Too bad those days are gone..... or have we just quit looking?

In the story, Elijahhad a strange feeling that his time on earth was ending.
*I don't think **that "premonition"** is so unusual, and I think we have more involvement in our death than we are comfortable admitting.*

Elijah..... knew that he would die soon.
Our text picks up the story just as he is leaving Gilgal. Gilgal is a location for a school of prophets. Elijah and Elisha were leaving the town, when Elijah stopped in the middle of the road, looked straight in Elisha's eyes, and said,
"Stay here, for the Lord has sent me to go on as far as Bethel."
[This Bethel is not to be confused with Bethel College in Kansas]

THIS... was a challenging decision for Elisha - to avoid the pain of witnessing the death of his friend and mentor -or- to continue on the journey with Elijah.

Challenge was not new to Elisha
His journey together with Elijah began with a challenge, when Elijah first called Elisha to join him.

Elisha was a rich kid, out working in the fields when Elijah, who was walking by, invited him to come along. Sounds a bit like a Jesus story, doesn't it,..... and *I wonder how many others Elijah had invited until he received a YES???*

Elisha stopped working, leaned on his hoe, and thought about it. HE hesitated, as most people would, yet before Elijah was out of sight, called to him - "**Yes I will,** - - - just wait until I say good-bye."

No doubt, Elisha recalled **that** past hesitation of his, Because he quickly answered to Elijah, who was staring straight into his eyes, and firmly responded, "I vow to God and you, and I will not leave you."

So, the two quietly journeyed on to Bethel – Elisha, all the time wondering about the unknown future; he and Elijah had done so much together; they were like father and son.
Before meeting Elisha, Elijah kept to himself - out in the wilderness.
After Elisha joined him, Elijah became more outgoing; he spent time nurturing Elisha, time with the other prophets and in the towns, too.

Quietly, they walked on. *The last moments are often solemn and **so very intense!***

Bethel, like Gilgal had a group of prophets. These groups were similar to clubs.

When the two arrived and visited with the prophets - the prophets, pulled Elisha aside and said, "Do you know that Elijah is going to die, today?"

*Boy,..... These prophets were **good!***

They knew about Elijah's pending death. They were definitely intuitive prophets, **and** perhaps, they were showing off some of their skills to Elisha.

{I won't guess and inject that Elijah may have been looking a little pale and walking heavy on his feet}

Elisha blurted out a terse response to them, "Just be quiet, I know, I know... I don't want to hear it."

I guess, Bethel didn't "feel" right to Elijah or maybe his visit with the prophets was disappointing. *Perhaps, there were too many "groupie" prophets running around soothsaying,.....* Because he **again** told Elisha, to stay put, and that his destination was NOW – Jericho.

Again, Elisha vowed his loyalty, and the two went on to Jericho together.

In this narrative, there were good opportunities to bail out, to see a different story,..... to experience an easier way.

Elisha's loyalty to Elijah was not just simple obedience, But rather it was a deep commitment to a friend, to God and to God's prophet - Elijah. This is the message we are meant to hear. This is the stuff prophets are made of – They were on a journey **with** and **for** God, to the end.

So,....on to Jericho they went.

Interestingly, the same thing happened in Jericho. A group of intuitive prophets huddled around Elisha, and told him of their "wise insight" – that Elijah would soon die.

Again, Elisha - told them to be quiet.

Elijah's death was not something he enjoyed being reminded about at every lousy town along the way.

And as in Bethel, Jericho apparently didn't "feel right".....Or... the response from the prophets wasn't as desired...or,, whatever the reason, Elijah announced, "No, not Gilgal, not Bethel, and Jericho is nice, but just isn't the place either. Instead, God calls me to beyond the Jordan, and that is where I shall die."

I can hardly imagine this process. ?? It must have been somewhat like picking out your own casket – trying each on for fit and comfort?????

Again, as Elijah did in the past, he suggests to Elisha that it is "okay for him to remain behind." And as before, Elisha vows his commitment to Elijah,and they walked on to the Jordan. However, this time.....50 of the prophets from Jericho followed at a safe distance.... They were Curious, I guess???

Of course, at issue was WHO would take Elijah's place when he dies. Elijah was the top prophet – *a sort of Prophet laureate.*

So, likely there was great speculation,.... with each of the prophets hoping they would be the one chosen, and wondering..... if they were chosen,..... how in the world could they convince the others of their new found status?

To the Jordan and beyond they went.... Out into the wilderness.....to the place from where Elijah came.

The 50 other prophets waited in the visible distance.

Two Silhouettes in a lonely place..... talk.

Last words before death are always profound.

Elijah beckoned, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I die?"

Elisha's response reveals that a replacement for Elijah had NOT been determined, ... when he asked, "May I be as your eldest son, and inherit your spiritual powers: ***Ruah....the wind..... the vital, divine energy.***

And, his question was a beautiful way of affirming Elijah's life ministry.

Elijah answered,..... "Oooo, that is a tough question..... That is beyond me,yet, if you Elisha,..... SEE me as I am being taken from you, then it will be granted.

If you Don't see my departure, then It will NOT be granted?"

IF YOU SEE????

Elijah challenged Elisha's faithfulness, and then invited him to See.... to see what God was about to do.

Jesus invited Peter, James and John to go up the mountain with him ... to experience / to see the divine, and witness God's affirmation of Jesus.

These witnesses were not expecting to see what they did. Neither situation is an example of projecting a vision or seeing a mirage. Moreover, it wasn't the site / the spectacle but rather the response that was important. Elisha's life was radically changed, and all who were on the mountain with Jesus were illuminated.

*More often than not, SEEING THE SPECTACULAR is more than just an accident or a lucky break. It requires being in the right place at the right time,..... PLUS..... THE PURSUIT and..... THE DEVOTION to **LOOKING.***

Storm chasers have a greater chance of seeing a tornado than others, and those who never look up at the clouds... likely will never see a tornado.

Back to the text:

Elijah and Elisha walked and talked some more. They were *two faithful servants of God, sharing last moments together.*

Then SUDDENLY,..... Elisha beheld a chariot of fire led by horses of fire.

This was an experience of being in the presence of God!!!

And how else could it be described????

Then with a roar..... a WHIRLWIND came and took Elijah into heaven!

Elisha KEPT WATCHING and SEEING,... Crying out to Elijah, **father, Father**, and then he proclaimed the presence of God as the Chariot of Fire!

Elisha DID see, and did become the heir to Elijah, and NO ONE denied his powers from God!!

Today, we just don't see that kind of Old Testament... supernatural presentation.... too bad, too bad.

I wonder,..... is God less active..... or is there another reason we don't see so well.

Paul writes in 2nd Corinthians that some people are blinded by their expectations, their desires and illusions.

Maybe we only see what we expect to see or...what we Want to see???

This past week CBC radio presented an interview with a Calgary oil executive. He was asked if he'd dare invite President Obama to see the strip mining and extraction at the TAR sands by Fort McMurray. The interviewer was implying that Obama would be shocked by all the destruction. Yet, the oil executive coolly answered, "If we flew him up there he would notice that there is nothing at all until Fort McMurray." He asserted that the huge strip mines are not as bad as some others in the world, and that they really aren't that big a deal since they are surrounded by Nothing. A number of times he called the Boreal forest NOTHING. All he could see was money from oil. He couldn't see the wonder and beauty of God's creation, especially in a pristine wilderness condition. The Oil executive looked and saw Nothing.

Yet, you know something.....???

The 50 other, "no name" prophets DID NOT SEE the chariot of fire OR the whirlwind, either!!

Was Elisha just lucky?

Or, was he selected and chosen to be the Sole witness OR WHAT?

Was he the only one chosen? ???

Remember, Elijah kept telling Elisha to stay behind. Those are NOT exactly words or directives given to one being singled out or chosen?

In addition, Elijah went to the towns of the prophets. They all knew what was going on, and in essence, the situation was a challenge for them to follow and look,.....if they wanted to.

Only Elisha, was willing to walk on..... TO The End!

I believe, the heir could have been anyone, But instead..... We remember Elisha.

The rest have NO names.

Moreover, was Elisha lucky?

Not at all, He was faithful, and he was looking. He was Looking for the activity of the divine... and he saw the Chariot of Fire.

Each of us are confronted with the same choice: To safely stay home in our comfortable routine....
OR to step out in faith and expectation!
And, **we know** what is going on We know what it means to let go of our fears and step out in
Expectant faith.....looking for the divine.
We Know HOW to look!

May we all open our spiritual eyes and see what DIVINITY there is to see.

Psalm 50 proclaims that God shines forth like a fire and a mighty storm.

Paul notes that we must believe to see, and when we do Believe.. with Expectation, ever looking – We
will see, with spiritual eyes we'll see.

We will see:

- God as a Daddy, and not some aloof concept.
- We'll see the hand of God in a sunrise.... that touches our hearts with the awareness of a new day.

We'll see what is more impressive than a thunderstorm Tornado.....

We'll see..... the **Whirlwind** in a persons eyes at the moment of discovering God's grace..... When she
realizes that amazing power that transforms like a mighty tempest.

When we truly LOOK: we'll see the passion of God at every church gathering; We'll sense God
listening to our prayers,

And we will see the Divine sparkle in a baby's smileor Holy hope in a Spring-song from a bird on
a sunny day.

We'll see God's Spirit – "Ruah" filling our soul with fire, and we'll also, see A Heavenly Daddy...
comforting us when we are down;

And, We may see God's active presence,TODAY,..... when we look, ...and it may appear as a
Chariot of Fire. ????

As Elijah implied to Elisha, so too are you and I invited..... to remain behind where it is cozy
and safe..... OR To go out in faithfulness...looking.... andexpecting.... to see the presence and
activity of God.

Lent begins this week.

I wonder where the path leads, and what there is to see along the way?

And,..... do something Biblical: invite someone into your life, to join you, and you both may be
surprised at what you discover.....along the way.