

## *Odd Enough?*

3<sup>rd</sup> Weekend of Kingdomtide – June 24/25, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

2 Kings 2:1-10 (NRSV)

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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.”

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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.”

<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. <sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup>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.” <sup>10</sup>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.”

*How odd are you? Odd enough?*

In the stories of Elijah and Elisha we enter the age of the prophets, those people who were called by God to confront kings and to call the people back to God.

Elijah shows up out of nowhere. We are told only that he is a Tishbite (from Tishbe, that is) who comes to confront King Ahab. We are a little better prepared for Elisha. At least we know that God sent Elijah to look for his successor. We also know that Elisha was a hard worker, willing to plow his fields, and that Elisha was very rich, as twelve teams of oxen represented substantial wealth (1 Kings 19:19-21).

*Two rich young men*

The story of Elisha brings to mind another rich young man. This young man came to Jesus, seemingly wanting to know how he might gain eternal life. Jesus gave the young

#### *Elisha*

Last week, we read the story of Elijah’s contest with the priests of Baal. After God’s dramatic victory over Baal the no-show, Elijah fled from the wrath of Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife. With the help of God’s angels, Elijah made his way to Mt. Horeb, God’s mountain, the place of the burning bush and the Ten Commandments. There, Elijah heard God in “the sound of sheer silence.” Among other things, God told Elijah to find a man named Elisha, whom Elijah was to anoint as his successor.

So Elijah left the mountain and sought out Elisha. Elijah found the young man plowing his field. As Elisha guided his oxen, Elijah tossed his own mantle<sup>1</sup> over the younger man; Elisha had been called by God. Elisha would leave everything to follow after Elijah. He even slaughtered his ox and sold all his farm equipment. There was no going back. Elisha committed himself 100%.

Later, after the death of Ahab, it was time for Elijah to leave this life. With Elisha standing near him, Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot riding upon a whirlwind. Elisha had asked that he might receive a double portion of Elijah’s spirit and, indeed, as Elijah ascended upward his mantle fell back to earth landing beside Elisha. He picked it up and, like Elijah, used it to part the waters of the Jordan river. The protégé would now carry on the work of his mentor.

On a personal level, Elisha’s ministry would be a ministry of life. He would restore to life a young boy who had died. He would save many lives by purifying a pot of poisonous stew. He would feed a hundred men with a few scraps. But Elisha would also follow in the political footsteps of his mentor. Elisha confronted the kings who turned away from the LORD. He played a key part in several Israelite victories. He was even instrumental in the overthrow of a king. Elisha never shirked away from the responsibilities given him by God and passed on to him by Elijah.

1. A mantle was a long piece of cloth, a bit like a shawl, that was worn over the shoulders. Elijah’s mantle for him was like the staff that Moses carried. For example, see verse 8 in today’s reading, where Elijah uses the mantle to part the Jordan River as Moses had used his staff to part the Red Sea.

man the answer he expected. Namely, that the young man was to keep the Law of Moses, as the young man knew he had. But then Jesus told the young man to also go sell all that he had and follow Jesus. The man knew that he would not and was even sad about it. (See Luke 18:18-23)

In stark contrast to the rich young man who came to Jesus, when Elijah comes to Elisha and throws his mantle on the ox-driving farmer, Elisha simply goes. He even burns his farm equipment and slaughters the oxen. There could be no going back for Elisha, no change of heart.

Jesus called the rich young man to a life of oddness, at least in the young man's terms. Who sells everything they have and heads out with an itinerant teacher? Elijah calls Elisha to a life of oddness and he goes, leaving everything behind.

*Oddness?*

You have a picture in your mind of an Old Testament prophet. Old, bearded, dressed shabbily, standing alone, shouting out "The end is near!!" to anyone who will listen. This picture isn't far from the mark. From Elijah to Elisha to Amos to Isaiah to Hosea to John the Baptist, odd is about the right word.

#### Bible and Story

I've been reading Eugene Peterson's *Eat This Book<sup>1</sup>: A conversation in the art of spiritual reading*. One of the things that Peterson wants us to appreciate is that the Bible consists largely of stories. Small stories within larger stories within still larger stories within the overarching story of God's work to redeem his creation.

Stories remind us that the Bible was first spoken, not written. Stories are one of the most accessible ways we share memories and insights. Few things are more memorable than a great story.

But stories also invite us in. We can participate in a story, we can get involved. When Elijah shows up at Elisha's field, telling him to drop everything and go, we can easily imagine what our own response might be.

The biblical stories invite us into God's story. The stories are not "illustrations" or "applications" or tools of any sort. Rather, the stories are personal, concrete, immediate, and relational. They are often ambiguous because life is ambiguous. They are honest because God is honest.

These are the stories of God and the people of God. Thus, these are our own family stories. When we read the stories of Elisha's life-giving ministry, we are reading (eating!!) the stories of our own ancestor and in them meeting our God and Father. These stories are not given to us so that we might pull God into our world, finding some advice or nugget of truth that we can put to work. No, we are given these stories so that we might enter God's world, so that we might see the far larger reality that is God.

1. From Revelation 10:9-10, where an angel tells John to take the scroll and eat it. It will be sweet in John's mouth but bitter in his stomach. Peterson sees this as a metaphor for our reading of the Bible. We are not actually to just read it, the way we read other written materials. We are to eat God's Word, taking it within us so that we may be transformed by it.

But odd to whom? Odd in whose eyes? Certainly to their family and neighbors. Surely to practically anyone who encountered them. But not to God. What is odd in the world is often right with God. The prophets "fit in" with God even if they don't seem to fit in with anyone else. Elijah fits in so well with God that he doesn't even die. He is taken directly to God in a fiery chariot, as his mantle falls to Elisha. The prophets are, as Ellsworth Kalas puts it, God's quiet heroes, but they are odd heroes.

The question we have to ask ourselves is whether we are odd . . . am I odd? Does anyone see me as out of step with the world? Behind the times? Outside the mainstream? At odds with the popular culture?

The Christian pollster George Barna has repeatedly found few lifestyle differences between those who are self-identified Christians and those who are not. Where we live. How we spend our money. The movies we see. The television we watch. Divorce rates. Pastimes. Vacations. In things large and small it is hard to see how Christians are odd. The Sermon on the Mount is certainly at odds with the world. Are we?

In 2 Kings 22, we meet Micaiah, a lone voice among the hundreds of prophets employed by the king. He alone is willing to tell the truth and give the king bad news, even though it gets him tossed in prison.

Being odd takes bravery. And it takes wisdom. Bravery helps us stand apart from the crowd that goes chasing after the latest spiritual trend. Wisdom, God's wisdom, enables us to discern when we are being truly "God-odd" and not simply ornery or peculiar.

God gives us all these stories that comprise Scripture so that we might begin to understand the true nature of reality, so that our minds might be transformed and our eyes opened to the authentic beauty and promise of God's creation. Then, and only then, can we see that when we follow Jesus with complete abandon we are not leaving the "real world" behind, we are stepping into the world as it really is, as the LORD God has made it. And the longer we live in God's world, the less odd it will seem.

## *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

June 25 - July 2

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> 2 Kings 22-25; Psalm 91 Josiah recovers the Book of the Law but Jerusalem still falls to the Babylonians</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> Luke 1-3; Psalm 92 The story of Jesus' birth; the arrival of John the Baptist</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> Luke 4-6; Psalm 93 Jesus is tempted in the wilderness; he begins his public ministry in Galilee and calls the twelve</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> Luke 7-9; Psalm 94 Jesus is shown to be greater than a prophet with power over all creation; Hearing and doing God's word</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p><b>Day 6</b> A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p><b>Day 7</b> Luke 10-12; Ecclesiastes 1 Jesus begins a long journey which will take him to Jerusalem; Are the disciples ready for the coming judgment?</p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### June Book Recommendation

#### *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision*, by Paul Wesley Chilcote

John Wesley's theological brilliance can be seen in his unerring commitment to the "both/ands" of the Christian faith. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. We are saved AND we are being saved. These and many other Christian claims are not choices, they are truths that we must sustain even if we don't fully grasp the mystery. This book is a slender introduction to the Wesley brothers' proclamations of the Good News. You will be introduced to the writings of John and to the theology of Charles' hymns. You will see how the Wesley brothers sought to hold on to the vital tension between faith and works, Word and Spirit, the personal and the social, and more.

The book is well-organized into four sections of two chapters each. Questions for reflection and discussion are provided at the end of each chapter, making this book very suitable for a Sunday School class or other small group.

***Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore, has copies of the CD recordings of a two-week class on *The Da Vinci Code* that Scott Engle recorded in 2004. This is a two-CD set and costs \$5.**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Odd. You've probably never been asked whether you are odd enough! You might begin this week by talking about this notion that Christians are to be odd, to be "God-odd." What do you think I mean? Do you agree? Think of some mature Christians you've known. Did they seem odd or different from other people? In what ways? In their capacity for compassion or kindness? In their gentleness or patience? Perhaps simply in the way they saw the every day stuff that makes up our lives. Make a list of some ways that Christians ought to be different from non-believers. In what ways are you different? Does growing in our discipleship also mean growing in our "oddness." How might you know when you are being different because you are walking before God and when you are being . . . well, just weird or eccentric?

Consider the story of Elisha. He is a rich man with a loving family. Yet, when Elijah shows up and says come, Elisha just goes, leaving no escape hatch in case things don't work out so well. Why Elisha? How could he simply drop everything and go? We get the answer in today's passage. When Elisha asks for a double-portion of Elijah's spirit, he is asking to be treated as Elijah's first-born son, his principal heir. Elisha wants to be given the divinely endowed charisma (gift of the Spirit) that was given to Elijah (see Numbers 11:16-30 for an interesting story about passing on some of this spirit). But Elijah cannot promise the gift to Elisha (v. 10). It is only God's to give. The willingness and ability to lead a "God-odd" life is not something that comes from within us. It is a gift from God. It is the Spirit of God who helps us to understand what God desires from us and who empowers us to live it.