

2 Kings 2:1-18 (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. ²Elijah 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. ³The 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.”

⁴Elijah 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. ⁵The 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.”

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

⁹When 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.” ¹⁰He 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.” ¹¹As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹²Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

¹³He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

¹⁵When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.” They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. ¹⁶They said to him, “See now, we have fifty strong men among your servants; please let them go and seek your master; it may be that the spirit of the LORD has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley.” He responded, “No, do not send them.” ¹⁷But when they urged him until he was ashamed, he said, “Send them.” So they sent fifty men who searched for three days but did not find him. ¹⁸When they came back to him (he had remained at Jericho), he said to them, “Did I not say to you, Do not go?”

Elijah is in very select company: The Never-Dead. Even Jesus can't claim membership. Indeed, were it not for the story of Enoch in Genesis 5, it would be a club of one: Elijah the Tisbbite.

Elisha stood wide-eyed, staring at the Jordan River. He had heard the stories about Elijah. He had even dropped everything to follow the prophet. But nothing had prepared him for this. The water of the Jordan River had folded back on itself. Just like that. He wasn't sure how he'd describe it to someone else. The water had simply parted, as if Moses himself had been right next standing to them, lifting his staff to the heavens. But all Elijah had done was to take his mantle from his shoulders, roll it up, and strike the dry ground of the riverbank with it.

The journey to the river had also been puzzling for the prophet-in-training. Elijah had repeatedly tried to go on alone, forcing Elisha to tell the old man, “No, I will not leave

you.” They had gone to Bethel, just north of Jerusalem, where a bunch of prophet types had come out to meet them. They had told Elisha that this would be his last day with Elijah, for God was going to take him away. Oddly, Elisha somehow knew that they were correct. Indeed, he had known before they told him.

The same thing happened again. Elijah had said, in his usual cryptic manner, that he was going on alone to Jericho. Elisha had again reiterated that he was staying with Elijah. And again, some prophets had come out to tell him what he already knew.

Elisha

A few weeks back, we hurried past the story of Elisha’s call to the prophetic ministry. Here’s a bit more about him and his work.

When Elijah met God at Mt. Horeb after fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel, he 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 (a shawl-like garment) 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%.

After the departure of his mentor, in a fiery chariot no less, Elisha carried on the work of his mentor.

Elisha’s ministry was a ministry of life. He restored life to a young boy who had died. He saved many lives by purifying a pot of poisonous stew. He fed a hundred men with a few scraps. But Elisha also followed 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.

Then they had pressed on a short distance to the Jordan River. Again, prophets had come out to meet them, but this time they had kept their distance.

Elisha stared at them now, as they stood in a group a short distance away. Perhaps they also were transfixed by Elijah’s parting of the waters.

But Elisha snapped out of it when he realized that Elijah was striding across the now-dry river bed. Elisha hurriedly tried to keep up. Soon, they were on the far bank and the waters of the river closed in behind the two men.

At that moment, Elisha knew that Elijah was about to depart and, this time, Elisha couldn’t follow. Perhaps, Elisha thought to himself, this is what Elijah had meant all along.

When Elijah asked the younger man what he could do for him before leaving, Elisha’s response was quick and certain. He asked for a double portion of Elijah’s prophetic spirit. Elisha wanted to be Elijah’s “eldest son” and successor.

Elisha felt a bit hurt by Elijah’s response. If Elisha sees the old man taken away, he’d get the double inheritance. But if he didn’t see it, then nothing. Like everything else, it seemed to be in God’s hands.

So Elisha waited, unsure of exactly what he was waiting for it. If he’d known, he wouldn’t have believed it anyway. It would make the parting of the river seem as ordinary as milking the family goat.

As the two men chatted, a fiery apparition swept in. It could best be described as a chariot made of fire pulled by horses of fire. In a single moment, Elijah had been swept upward and disappeared into a whirlwind that raced towards the heavens.

Elijah had not died. He had simply gone . . . or, more accurately, he was taken away.

The old prophet's mantle had fallen out of the sky. It lay on the ground next to Elisha. He looked at it for a moment or two, and then picked it up. He had seen everything that had happened; he was to be Elijah's successor. He couldn't say he understood much, but he guessed that was the way it would be most of the time.

Elisha walked back to the riverbank, mantle in hand, rolled it up, just as his teacher had done, and tapped the ground . . . the river parted for him. Incredible, he thought. This was going to take some getting used to.

Elisha walked slowly across the dry bed, enjoying the sheer novelty of the whole thing. When he reached the far side, the prophets, who were watching as best they could, rushed up to him. Some even bowed to him. Their pronouncement with straightforward; "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

Elisha hoped that he was up to the task ahead. But he caught himself. Of course he would be, for no matter what happened or how odd Elisha might feel at times, he was now a genuine prophet of the LORD God Almighty.

Odd man in?

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.

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 met 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.

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.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday class in Festival Hall Beginning September 12:

The Bible and the Qur'an: Side by Side

How much do you really know about the Qur'an? For most of us, the answer is not much. In this series, we'll be looking at the treatment of important biblical subjects, such as Adam and Jesus, from the perspective of both the Bible and the Qur'an. We'll begin with a brief introduction to the Qur'an. This promises to be one of our most interesting and timely series in a while.

Through Sept. 5: Books of the Apocrypha

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Beginning Monday evening, September 20 (6:45-8:30)
Scott's evening Bible study for the fall

The Book of Daniel

Daniel, one of the most misused books in the Bible, asks the question, "Who's in charge here?" The reader is taken on a journey from despair to hope, traveling through some well-known Sunday School stories and imaginative visions of God's triumph. Join us as we examine the handwriting on the wall (one those famous stories) and meet the Son of Man. This eight-week study will challenge your heart, your intellect, and your imagination.

To register go to www.scottengle.org and click on the Bible Academy registration link or call Kate Huber at 214-291-8021.

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Also: every Tuesday, a lunchtime brownbag in-depth Bible study
with Scott Engle from 11:45 - 1:00, Room 127.

Just drop in when you can!

We are studying Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Galatians is one Paul's earliest and most forceful letters. We hope you'll drop in and join us when you can. Each week stands alone. Given the open and free-wheeling format, this should prove to be a very interesting life-shaping journey.