

Turning Points

2 Kings 2:1-12

Mark 9:2-9

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

2 Kings 2:1-12

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 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. 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." 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. 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." 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. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 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.

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." 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." As 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. Elisha 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.

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

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Turning points are those pivotal moments in which we change course and take a different direction, hopefully for the better, but sometimes it is for the worse, at least temporarily. Turning points change our status quo, our connections. They can upend our priorities, our relationships, our awareness, our sense of self. What we know in one moment will be different, transformed,

going forward. Turning points can confuse and disorient us as we need to reset our bearings as things unfold and evolve around us. Then they will move us forward.

Both of our Scripture lessons do that as Elijah and Elisha each experienced unprecedented turning points that not only impacted their own lives but will forever shape Judaism and Islam and Christianity. Elijah will even one day appear with Moses on a high mountain. For Peter, James and John, still trying to make sense of Jesus' revelation as the suffering Messiah just six days before they hiked up Mt Tabor, they now see the turning point in Jesus' life that begins his journey to Jerusalem, all of them knowing just what it will bring.

Elisha had his turning point as the prophet, and his mentor, Elijah was nearing the end of his life—a life that ended in an ascension escorted by a chariot of fire and horses in a whirlwind into heaven rather than in death—an ascension witnessed by Elisha who in an instant was transformed from disciple to successor.

Elijah three times had tried to send Elisha away, but Elisha remained adamant in his promise that he would stay close. Before we think of this moment as the pesky-tag-along-little-brother-who-just-won't-shoo image, they are in fact reenacting a practice of sending away that is still practiced in Judaism today.¹ If someone goes to a synagogue and wants to convert to Judaism, the rabbi is supposed to send them away three times. “No, being Jewish is hard; go back to something easier, like not being Jewish.” Only if you persist beyond the third sending are they supposed to let you prepare to convert. Elisha will not go away.

Elijah and Elisha show us something important about mentors and students, about following and about leadership. Their relationship also recalls Moses' relationship with Joshua. Just before Moses died, he handed leadership over to Joshua, who conquered the promised land.

As Elijah prepared to go and turn his leadership over to Elisha, this brand new leader had a bold and daring request as he asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. And Elisha gets what he asks for. The rabbis credit Elijah with eight miracles in scripture and Elisha 16.

Jason Byasse, a Methodist pastor in Toronto invites us to, “think of key moments in leadership succession—in politics or business or the military or a family. When we lose an elder, we feel that loss. We think, “No one can measure up; things will get worse.” But Elisha defies that logic. He says, “Elijah, whatever made you special, I want more than that. Double that.”

The transition from a beloved elder to a new and untested younger doesn't have to be a loss. It can be a gain, a doubling, a greater portion. Religion is so often so deeply conservative—cherishing the past, fearing the present. But this is where Christian faith is radically hopeful. The best is yet to come.”

The best is yet to come. Hardly what the disciples would have imagined on the high mountain in the presence of Moses and Elijah, as Jesus stood with the Law and the Prophets, as Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Jesus' turning point led them down the mountain but not back west to the Galilean villages where they had been, but south to Jerusalem, and to the message he had spoken just six days earlier. ‘Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.’ⁱⁱ

Until the past few days Peter, James and John had no reason to expect that anything would change. They were a part of the inner circle of this amazing preacher, teacher and healer, this miracle worker who could feed thousands with a few loaves of bread and two fish, who could calm a raging storm and walk on water. There were challenges of course, Pharisees and

Sadducees and ordinary disbelievers, but this was mostly a wonderful life, and they were privileged and blessed. Now it has all turned inside out and upside down.

Jesus and the disciples show us something important about following and about leadership. Jesus did as Paul would one day write, “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.”ⁱⁱⁱ And although they had their times of stumbling, misunderstanding, failures, absence and even denial, the disciples were a part of it all, to the cross and beyond.

This is what the turning point of the Transfiguration means for all who follow Jesus Christ, who follow his leadership. Because he has shown us the way, we can follow in his footsteps and allow God to use us as instruments of grace and love, as God chooses,^{iv} because the best is yet to come.

Today there is another turning point, a pivotal moment, one that is for us as we gather for our Annual Meeting. We will look back on the highs and lows of last year and we will look at some of the financial challenges and property difficulties and cultural shifts and membership concerns that face us today. We will in the words of Jason Byassee, by “cherishing the past, fearing the present,” we will look at ways to be persistent and go forward, to know that we can and do measure up, that we have footsteps to follow in as we take the path of the turning points first set out before us at our Oct 7 visioning and vitality retreat, as we hear and hold onto the rest of his quote, “this is where Christian faith is radically hopeful. The best is yet to come.”

The best is yet to come. Amen.

ⁱ Jason Byassee, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-2-kings-21-12-6>

ⁱⁱ Mark 8:31

ⁱⁱⁱ Philippians 2: 8

^{iv} Philip W. McLarty, <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/mark-9-2-9-turning-points-mclarty/>