

## **Double Measure**

Menno Mennonite Church

February 11, 2024

**Purpose:** to explore the desire for the Spirit reflected in the coming close of its gifts.

**Message:** As tempted as we are to hold on to what we have we are invited to reach out to what God offers all the same.

**Scripture:** 2 Kings 2:1-12 (I will read); Mark 9:2-9 (please read)

**Synopsis:** From the outset we know that the story of letting go of Elijah is a story of loss. It is a story of one of the major figures of the faith exiting the scene, though notably not by way of death. The line of inheritance has been set up and Elisha follows after Elijah literally as he goes from place to place despite Elijah time and again telling him to turn back. In the final moment he makes but one request: to be granted a double portion of Elijah's spirit for the work ahead.

We, of course, would much rather nothing in our lives ever change. Sometimes we value stability over vitality if, for no other reason, it is what we can actually understand, where as something new requires that we adapt. Here Elisha asks for what he needs to continue not out of some sort of superiority of processing more than anyone else (a double measure of inheritance was the natural right of the first born and inheritor in Judiac life) but to be granted the measure of what is required for what lay ahead. Jesus offers the same to the Disciples. How might we seek the full measure of the Spirit to guide us into what God is doing in our midst, trusting that we will be gifted fully as God's grace allows?

## **2 Kings 2:1-12**

2 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.”

<sup>11</sup>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.

<sup>12</sup>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.

Think about your holy space. The point at which you feel at peace, connected, inspired. I am guessing that even this very little bit of prompting has taken you some place and brought details to mind, likely vividly. Perhaps it is a particular time, place, circumstance. Maybe it is a space that connects you most deeply. What ever it is we know it intuitively because it is where our souls connect most clearly. For me this space is not so much a particular location as it is a circumstance. There is something about a campfire that resonates deeply for me. Of course, there is magic in any campfire that allows one to gather around warmth and light, but even more so for me is the experience of the church camp campfire that resonates so well.

I was a camp enthusiast from the very beginning. Whether it was the camp just 6 miles from our front door growing up or later the 6 hour bus ride to and from the camp we attended in Michigan, camp was routinely the highlight of my year. It was a space that allowed me to be authentically who I was and to be loved for it. Throw the weekly talent show and a routine I ripped off from the Bill Cosby records that I had at home that killed (annually—someone should have clued me in on some fresh material), camp became my home in the truest sense of feeling most alive and connected. Put a campfire in there and the opportunity to talk about faith with sincerity and seriousness, and the sense of the holy is almost palpable. There is little wonder why I was quick to sign up when given the opportunity to serve as staff—all the way through college. Even now, the opportunity to gather and talk with youth about faith around the campfire, to speak what is often the most important thing to say, especially to those growing into maturity—that God loves you fully and unconditionally, no matter what—is a holy thing indeed. I can easily draw a line from the logs around a campfire, hearing calling for the first time, directly to standing before you today (and, in retrospect, I should likely circle the stand up comedy along the way too). Camp and camping is holy business because it is an opportunity to show God's love; not just talk about it.

Our places, many as they are and in the many ways that they show themselves are the thin places in our lives. That is why they stick with us so readily and completely that it doesn't take a whole lot of consideration to bring them to mind: they resonate with us as the moments where God came near. The callouses that we so easily, unintentionally develop through the bumps of life and living can be pricked and prodded in the right circumstances and grant us a connection to the holy that is not normally present in the routines. It is where God's presence comes and is made real, and we are changed, often left wanting and wishing to get back there

somehow to recapture the secret formula of circumstances that made it all possible. It is where we want to be and sometimes are left wanting to get there.

Our reading for this morning are just such moments of thin space; so much so that most of the time we are not entirely sure what to do with them. The transfiguration points from the New Testament back to the old, connecting Jesus with the prophets of old. This is something so remarkable that even Mark who is known for jumping from story to story The handing of the mantle of prophethood from Elijah to Elisha not only establishes the precedent of how prophetic ministry has been maintained through the ages, and establishes the identity of Elijah as the forefather of the prophetic identity. They both take us to the places of divine interaction where the world as we know it rubs up against the world as it most fully, truly is. That is what makes these narratives wonderfully odd and perplexing to be sure, but also it is what makes them resonantly familiar as well even if appearances and whirlwinds have not been our experiences of the divine. These stories, as far from our experience as they are, remind us that God's thin places abound if we look for them.

Sometime these are hard places and tough experiences. Elisha knows from the start that Elijah is departing from him. As he follows Elijah despite Elijah's objections he encounters the word of the other prophets along the way wondering if he realizes what is going on. The best he can say is "Let's not talk about it." But he knows, and he is grieving. Elisha finds a way to continue to be faithful to Elijah even though it would seem that Elijah would spare him from the pain by leaving him behind. But he will not be separated; he must go and is adamant that he follows on behind and to see it through. This sending away is still practiced in Judaism. If you turn up at a synagogue and say you want to convert to Judaism, the rabbi is supposed to send you away three times. "No, being Jewish is hard; go back to something easier, like not being Jewish." Only if you persist past that are they supposed to let you prepare to convert. Elisha won't go away.

Every time there is a transition of power, there are questions to be asked. There is grief when a leader—of what ever stripe—steps aside to make room for what is next. There is grief and the inevitable comparison that there is no one could possibly replace the one who is going away. It is part of the natural anxiety of making change.

But Elisha challenges those assumptions. He comes along side; he persists to the very end and then he is given the opportunity to make a request. Here he shows the way. He says

“Elijah, what ever made you special, I want more of that. What ever brings you here, give me twice as much. What ever enables all of this to come and to happen give me more.” Scripture is showing that what ever happens next, it is the Spirit who will be in charge.

Placing Elijah and the transfiguration in conversation is helpful not only because it brings two of our mentions of Elijah into the same place and time, but it models the options for attending to the holy moments of life. In the transfiguration, the response of the disciples is one of amazement and fear followed shortly by memorializing. They wanted to stay put, build some infrastructure and make sure that this extraordinary thing that they had could be preserved. You encounter the holy and you try to hold onto it by codifying and replicating it. Have you ever wondered why camps and churches are so traditional? I mean, can camp be camp without spaghetti “we lost the spoons” night? Can church be church without our favorite hymns, way and means? We hold onto the traditions because we love them and they give us comfort, absolutely, but even more so because we feel their totemic power to create the circumstances once again where the space between earth below and heaven above didn’t feel quite so impassable, quite so permanent. We reach for these locations because we are reaching for God through that which we understand the best—figuring out what worked last time and holding on accordingly. That is the normal way: if you find something that works, make a program to replicate it. Do you remember the revival at Asbury University a year ago now? 16 days of worship continued non-stop by the working of the Spirit. It was awe-inspiring and wonderful to see, spurred by social media and genuine coverage. But it was almost instantly that we saw speculation as to how to continue this success elsewhere. When the Spirit comes, we often want to organize the best we may.

But Elisha models the other way. “What ever you had here, give me some too—actually a double order if you don’t mind.” What a thing to ask for; what a thing to be granted. Most of the time our prayers are fairly small and demur—give us what we need to continue. What would happen were we to ask God for so much that God says, “Woah, hey, that’s hard! Maybe ease up on me a little?” When Jesus tells the disciples he’s going away, he says, “Actually, you want me to go, because when the Holy Spirit comes, you’ll do greater things than I ever did.” Uh, greater than raising the dead? Feeding 5,000? “Yep. A double mouthful.” This is precisely what Elisha gets too. He picks up where Elijahs leaves of, parting the waters of the Jordan to make his way back to the other side.

We are tempted to think of the holy places of the past as just that: those things that were that cannot be reclaimed. That the moment is gone and cannot be captured again. And to be sure, that is sometimes true through no fault of anyone. But is equally true, and what must always remain true where faith in the living God is involved, so too is the Spirit. The Spirit is that which works and leads us time and again to life where we least expect it, and even renewal where stagnation might be the rule. We can grieve that which is lost from us, as grieve we must. But we must also pray—fervently, sincerely—that the Spirit that filled those who came before would come and fill us not only again, but even more so. As tied to history and past as religion indeed can be at times, noting and being inspired by the world as it was, we must never forget that the foundational promises of faith point us to one thing: that no matter how good the past has been, the best is yet to be, for God is in it.

We seek our holy, thin places. We seek God. May we in our seeking always know what we are seeking: not the experience and the recreation, but the breathing incarnation of the creating God creating still. May this inspire us, always. Amen.