

2 Kings 2:1-12 Pastor Bill Uetricht 2/14/21 Transfiguration

One of the best programs that we have around here, when it goes well, is our confirmation mentoring program. In that program we match our final year confirmation students with an adult who is intended to help mentor them in their faith development. A couple weeks back, our mentors and mentees met via Zoom. As the host for the Zoom meeting, I had the privilege of popping into each of their conversations. Some of what I overheard just thrilled me. One mentor was talking to the student about an approach to faith that moved beyond easy answers. Another was speaking to his mentee about the struggle with the relationship of Biblical stories with scientific truth. He spoke to the student about the power of metaphor, of understanding Biblical truth not in literalistic ways.

I heard these conversations, and I rejoiced not simply in the grown-up understandings that our students were being led into, but also simply in the significance of mentoring itself. Life at its depths is not a private journey. Life in its fullest is not something we discover on our own, without the help of others. Mentoring is not just a nice idea; it is integral to the life of life itself.

In today's first reading from Second Kings, we experience mentoring in a consummate way in the relationship of Elisha with Elijah. Both of these men are prophets, an emerging leadership role in the ancient life of Israel. Elijah would have been a lead prophet.

Now Elijah was no perfect guy, you must know. If you read the stories about him in First and Second Kings, you encounter a frightened man who seems bent on running from God's call of him. Get this! Mentors are not paragons of perfection. If you are seeking a mentor who has no faults, struggles, or wounds, you probably ought to look some place than the human race. Sometimes the best mentors are those who recognize their woundedness, are able to admit their faults and struggles.

But all of that is an aside. Elijah is Elisha's mentor. And the story we encounter in Second Kings today tells of the time when Elisha must pick up the mantle from Elijah, must take over his job. Now, it's obvious from the

story that Elisha is not eager for his mentor to be gone. Twice in the story, a group of prophets confronts Elisha with this question: “Do you know that the Lord will take your master away from you?” And twice Elisha responds: “Shut up; I don’t want to talk about it.

Elisha doesn’t want to confront the loss of the one he later will call “Father”—a father not in biological terms, but more in spiritual terms. Elijah has mentored him into his prophetic role. Elijah has been Elisha’s mentor on the job. And the mentoring has occurred so that the job can become Elisha’s. And Elisha at this point seems overwhelmed by that prospect. He’s not ready for the job, and he’s not ready to say goodbye to his mentor.

But this is how it works in life. Life comes and it goes. Mentors come and they go. The best mentors are not those who tie you to themselves so that there is almost no distinction between you and them. Yes, mentors teach. Yes, mentors inspire. Yes, mentors lead you. But the best mentoring occurs when the mentors empower you, set you free, help put you on your own feet. That is what mentoring does. At some point, the mentor disappears.

In my early life, without a doubt, my Mom was my mentor. She clearly was no perfect human being. She had all kinds of faults, faults that I discovered more fully when I got much older, and I became a bit of a mentor to her. When I was young, she mentored me into faith, mentored me into a deep relationship with the community of faith. I have gone in different directions than perhaps she would have gone. But I would not be who I am apart from who she was.

We’re coming up on the first anniversary of my Mom’s death, and I have to say that I think about her often. I didn’t think I would. She had become somewhat difficult, a lot of care, especially to my sister. But she had been my mentor in my early life. Letting go is not easy. In some ways, it’s probably the challenge of a lifetime.

I find Elisha’s letting go process telling. He and Elijah as they are preparing for Elijah’s voyage to heaven take a journey that is very much like the journey that their father in faith, Joshua, took, as he traveled from Gilgal

to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River. It's like "déjà vu all over again." They are going the way that their ancestor Joshua went. And note what happens when they arrive at the Jordan. Elijah takes his mantle, his overcoat, rolls it up, and strikes the water, parting it into two, enabling Elisha and him to cross over it. Speaking of déjà vu all over again! This sure sounds not only like what Joshua did, but what Moses did. Moses parted the water. Elijah and Elisha are participating in the great narrative that is their people's story. The relationship between Elijah and Elisha is seen in light of a larger story.

The best mentoring relationships are those that bear witness to something bigger than their own relationship. If your mentoring relationship is only about the mentor or about your relationship with the mentor, problems are likely to occur. There's going to be deep disappointment—the mentor will disappear at some point. And there will also be a lack of resources to put the relationship in some kind of big and healthy context. If you are just following one person and that following is not a part of a big, healthy story, the consequences can be destructive. As I said two weeks ago, people are wired to be led, wired to be mentored. That wiring means that they will attach themselves to any kind of story, to puny stories, stories that are anything but healthy. The more we experience what happened at our nation's Capitol a couple of weeks ago, the more we know that is true.

My Mom mentored me into the story of the faith, a big narrative, a narrative that is ancient. This story finds its fulfillment in the story of Jesus, a story that is indeed healthy and, as we will see in just a few moments, life giving. As I let my Mom go, I am surrounded by that story, by a story that is larger than her, me, and us together, a story that is going some place good.

It's the story of Jesus which is the focus of today, Transfiguration Sunday. This is a day that is all about Jesus, his big story. Today he takes some of his inner circle up on a mountain. Déjà vu all over again! And there on the mountain, his person is transformed, transfigured. His clothes become dazzling white. And with him appear great figures out of the great narrative: Elijah and Moses. This Jesus guy is connected to a bigger story.

Peter loves what is going on, and he wants to make it permanent, suggesting that three tents be put up for these great figures. But that bumbling suggestion is overshadowed by a cloud, from which a voice says: "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him." And suddenly, Elijah and Moses disappear. Only Jesus remains.

We're within the big narrative, but the story has taken a turn. Jesus is now the lead character. He is the one worthy to be the leader, the mentor. The big story now is centered on him. The glory of God, the light is shining on him.

Interestingly enough, though, after Peter, James, John, and Jesus come down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone what they just experienced, until after he is raised from the dead. There is an interesting part of the Elisha and Elijah story that is instructive for us here, it seems to me. Elisha is told that he cannot receive from Elijah a double portion of his spirit (of him), unless he watches Elijah all the way to the end of his journey to God. Elisha can't take his eyes off of Elijah until it is over.

I think Mark is asking us to keep our eyes on Jesus until it is over, until he dies and is resurrected. Only then will we get it. The story of Jesus cannot be understood apart from the story of his death. You see, Jesus in Mark has just told his disciples that he must die. Peter in response says: "Shut up; I don't want to talk about it." But Jesus insists on talking about it and not just about his death, but about their deaths. He says: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose it will save it."

The one upon whom the light is shining today is the one who is taking us into Lent, the one who desires to mentor us into dying and then being raised again. You know, we sometimes think the best mentors are those who make us feel good about ourselves. And don't get me wrong. I think good mentors get us in touch with the wonderful character of being who we are. If your mentor is tearing you apart, causing you to sink to new lows in your assessment of your humanity, find a new mentor. But understand this,

to be mentored by Jesus is to be taken to the place where you will have to struggle with yourself, where you will have to get over yourself, where your ego, the thing that you often think is most important of all, will need to die.

When we are baptized into Christ, we die with him. When we share in his body and blood in communion, we share in his death. A journey with Jesus is a journey into the hard stuff. But trust me. The journey into the hard stuff eventually brings us into real life. If you want a mentor who tells you simply what you want to hear, if you want a mentor who will enable you to maintain your fragile little ego, then don't sit down at the feet of Jesus.

But if you want to be mentored from death into life, if you want to be moved from your self-preoccupation to a life of freely-given service to others, then listen to Jesus. When Jesus mentors us, he uses the hard stuff to take us to the good stuff. Don't tell anybody that right now, though. I suspect they won't get that until the end, until the dead Jesus is raised to life.