

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

I'm Walking with You

2 Kings 2:1-15 (NIV)

¹ When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. ³ The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet." ⁴ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. ⁵ The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet." ⁶ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. ⁷ Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. ⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. ¹⁰ "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not." ¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. ¹³ Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. ¹⁵ The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

Walking is good exercise, but walking with someone makes it better because you have company to pass the time away, take your mind off of just mindlessly going on your route to give your body its needed exercise. There's encouragement as the other person can help motivate you when you just don't want to do it. And it goes the other way when you encourage the person who doesn't want to go. You hold each other accountable. You push each other. Walking together is a good thing.

Elisha and Elijah walked together, but it wasn't for exercise. It was almost time for Elijah to depart life on earth and go to heaven. This is something that had been revealed to him, to Elisha, and even to these schools or companies of prophets in Israel. Throughout our section today, Elijah consistently tells Elisha to stay behind. Maybe this was to spare Elisha the pain and heartache and the trauma of seeing him leave. Maybe Elijah thought his final encouragement to the various companies of prophets would go easier if he did this by himself. But Elisha refused to leave Elijah's side. He was going to walk with him all the way to the end.

This is made more significant when you remember that about six years prior Elijah was done being a prophet. He had stood up to the king and queen of Israel and to all the prophets of Baal and Asherah and the LORD had given him victory over them all on Mount Carmel. But Queen Jezebel then called for Elijah's head. Elijah fled. Depression hit him hard as he wouldn't go any farther and just slept. The LORD came to him, fed him, had him sleep some more, fed him again, and then told him to get up. Elijah replied by telling him that the LORD should just take his life since all his work was useless and there were no other believers. Just end it all. Elijah was alone, depressed, and verging on being suicidal.

So the LORD tells Elijah that he has reserved 7,000 faithful people in Israel who did indeed still believe in the LORD, who hadn't followed the false gods of Baal and Asherah. Then the LORD commissioned Elijah to go and anoint a successor, a prophet to take his place, a prophet who would walk with him. The LORD sent Elijah to go and anoint Elisha as that prophet. Elijah was not alone physically anymore. And now Elisha would not leave his master Elijah, swearing an oath for it.

With whom do you walk? Do you walk with the easy people, the people who don't need anything from you, the people who don't challenge you or push you, the people who don't have drama that they push on you? Have you stopped walking with some people because these things were too much, that you couldn't handle all the things that they needed help with? Did it get too hard for you to encourage them, to walk with them through depression and heartache, through grief and sadness and pain, through suicidal thoughts? Did you stop walking with them because they hurt you and you want to shield yourself from that pain?

Maybe on the other side, do you urge people not to walk with you like Elijah did? Do you try to walk alone because of your pride, thinking it's easier not to deal with other people? Do you think that you can do it all on your own, or that you should be self-sufficient, that I shouldn't need help from anyone, and I'm not going to ask for help from anyone, that I'm not going to be a drain on my family and friends and neighbors? No, I'm going to take care of this. You stay here. And so you walk alone.

But what happens to you when you walk alone? Who is there to pick you up? Who is there to encourage you? Who is there to push you when you don't want to push yourself to do what is good? Who is there to bounce ideas off of, to help direct you as to whether or not what you are going through is normal? Who is there to sharpen you? Who is there to call you out and correct you?

Think of a single tree out in the plains of Nebraska or Wyoming. The wind comes sweeping through strong enough and it will take that tree out. Clump a bunch of trees together, though, and they support each other, share the distributing of the wind's power. They stay because they stand together, not alone. Solomon even notes this wisdom in Ecclesiastes: "Two are better than one... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) It's the same for Elijah and Elisha and for you and for me. This is one of the reasons that Jesus came in the flesh into our world.

As his time was drawing near when he would go to Jerusalem, be betrayed, suffer injustice, beatings, insults, and then death on a cross, Jesus asked people to walk with him. Today on this mountain top, it was Peter, James, and John. Jesus knew that them seeing what he would go through would be hard on them, discouraging, depressing, that they would want to give up, maybe fall from faith. So, he showed them in a moment on that mountain his glory, that he was not just a man, but also God. He was also not alone. God the Father was with him and was well pleased with him. God the Holy Spirit accompanied him and strengthened him.

Jesus gave them this glimpse of his glory to help them walk through these upcoming horrible events, so that they know that he is the only one who can pay the price for all our sins, that the same one who can willingly give up his life can also of his own will take it up again, assuring us that all our sins are paid for, of all the times that we failed to walk with others who needed us when it got too hard, of all the times when we pushed people away who were offering and willing to walk with us. Although God the Father left God the Son on the cross when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", Jesus' resurrection from the dead proves that God does and always will walk with us, never abandoning us, never asking us to stay behind, always giving us a reason to go on, that we will one day enjoy the glory that he has done for us, that we will be in his presence forever.

Until that day, God has given us not just himself to walk with us, but each other. He brought each and every single one of you here to this congregation, this portion of the body of Christ, and united us by him so that we would walk together. He has even brought us together into something even bigger. Sometimes you hear me talk about our national church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. It's got Wisconsin in the name because it was in that state back in 1850 that 3 groups of Christians got together. It's called Evangelical because what brought them together was the Gospel, how Jesus lived perfectly for us, was forsaken by God on the cross for us to take away our sins, and rose from the dead assuring us that we will be with him forever. It's called Lutheran because we return to God's Word for all that we believe, the thing that unites us. It's called a Synod because we walk together.

That's what that Greek word synod means: a journey together, brothers and sisters in Christ walking together in our Lord, in what we believe. We are here to walk with each other when we are depressed or when they're depressed, when we don't think we can go on and we want to give up or when they do. Yes, we have our LORD always walking with us, but our LORD also knows that we need other people walking with us. He puts us together to synod, to walk together, to help us through the pain, the depression, the thoughts of not going on, the grief, the sadness, the heartache, the challenges, the loneliness.

So, who are you going to walk with? Don't wait for someone to saddle up next to you and offer. It's great when that happens, but what are you going to do to walk with someone else? Yes, you are probably already walking with your family, your spouse, but look around. Who is one more person to whom you can be like Elisha and offer to walk with and not leave them no matter how hard it gets, that you will love them the same way that God loves you? Who can you walk with as they struggle through challenges, depression, the loneliness of life? We're not going to be able to walk with everyone, but we can and should walk with someone.

You and I, as we walk through life, we never walk it alone. The LORD is always walking with us. But he has also called us to be like Elisha and walk with other people, even brought them into our lives to do this, brought them here with us. Walk with the people that the LORD has given to you when it's easy and when it's hard. Walk with them knowing that glory which God has prepared for us, that we stick with each and encourage one another to keep walking to heaven as the LORD walks with us. Amen.