

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-22; Luke 9:57-62
The Task for Today
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Whether we realize it or not, we all know where Gilgal is. You've lived in Gilgal. I've lived in Gilgal. Gilgal is was a place with which God's people had a lot amount of experience. When Joshua, after having helped lead the people of Israel 40 years through the desert alongside Moses and Aaron, was finally called upon to step with them into the Promised Land, the point where captivity ended, and the Promised Land began was Gilgal.

Gilgal is the place where the past and the future converge. Gilgal is a way of describing this present moment, which is the only place in which we live. In other words Gilgal is always right now. Moving from the past which we cannot recreate, into the future which is yet unknown, we always only have Gilgal.

Last week I was with some friends sitting at their kitchen table, when one of their family members came in from mowing the lawn. One of them asked: "How are you doing?"

"I'm transitioning." What an interesting response I thought. For him at this moment he was transitioning from mowing the grass to getting in his car to drive out to Maine to climb a mountain. So, in other words, a regular Thursday. But at that present moment he was between the project he'd just finished and the task that lay ahead. That's Gilgal.

This morning we read two passages, one about the Prophets Elijah and Elisha, and the other, Jesus and some disciples who just can't seem to wrap their minds around the importance of this present moment.

When the time came for Elijah to pass on his calling of Prophet to another, a man named Elisha (maybe God didn't feel like learning a new Prophet's name. What's your name? Elisha, yeah that's close enough). And back in 1 Kings 19 when God instructed Elijah to anoint Elisha prophet, interestingly Elisha says "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Did you notice that is something very similar to what the disciples say to Jesus in Luke 9.

Seems that as God's people, even those of us who have been given really important tasks, can't help but say "I'll do it, but let me just relive the past a bit before we leave." To which Elijah says, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?"

When Elisha accepted his call to succeed Elijah back in chapter 19, there is this wonderful and easily overlooked twist in the story. Elisha goes home sacrifices the yoke of oxen he used to farm the fields in his former life. Then takes the plow, kindles a fire and boils the sacrifice. Elisha is literally and symbolically forsaking his former life and everything that might tempt him to return, for the calling now before him.

This is what I ask every couple who stands before me on these steps in marriage. You might even say that these steps here are Gilgal. Forsaking all others, bind yourself to this one person for a future to be discovered. Leave your old life, your parents, your old ways of doing things, and in this

moment cleave to this one person. Marriage, after all is the most beautiful metaphor we have for God's relationship to the Church, and the horizons of possibility yet undiscovered are out there before us. Amazing and transformative, life changing possibilities, but we so often cannot see them, or perhaps do not want to see them, because they're unknown, and that's a little scary.

Those of you who have visited me in my office know that I have a sign that hangs in the window that reads, "burn the plow." The Bible is God's big plan to create a people in his image and live in communion and fellowship with them, and our unwillingness to trust that plan—so we try and do it ourselves. What Elisha does eventually is say, God I'm all in, all that is behind is the past, you are my future. Have you had a burn the plow moment of decision?

But in today's passage, Elijah can't hardly shake Elisha from his side. Two times Elijah says to Elisha, "stay here, the Lord has sent me to Bethel/Jordan." But his calling was not the same as Elijah's. Elisha's task would not look the same as Elijah's, for one thing Elisha would have pupils, and would perform miraculous healings similar to Jesus. Peter Leithart, in his commentary suggests that Elijah is to John the Baptist, as Elisha is to Jesus. But Elisha had to accept that his ministry would look different.

When it came time for the two to depart, and for Elijah to pass on his mantle (the symbol of his calling as a prophet) to Elisha, he says to Elisha: "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me." The literal Hebrew translation of the word for double portion is "double mouth." Elisha would need an extra measure because he would perform twice as many healings, give twice as many prophetic messages. But I think there is another reason, perhaps one that was unknown to him at the time. Elisha needed a double portion because his calling would look different from Elijah's, it would be completely new.

We do not have the luxury as God's people of simply recapitulating the past, this isn't rinse, dry, repeat. The future God has for us is always something new. We are always looking out over the new country of our lives from Gilgal. And for that we need a double portion.

Do you have someone in your life who was a mentor to you, someone who modeled what faithful parenting, skillful engineering, or teaching, or construction work looked like, someone who modeled what faithful faith looks like? Do you have this person in your mind? I do.

Now let me ask you this, are you the same as that person? Is the work you have been asked to perform or given to you look the same? Does your work, your parenting, your preaching look just like theirs looked? Of course not, we do not replicate our teachers and mentors, we receive the essence of their spirit, their God-instilled passion, their skill, and then harness it for the tasks ahead of us. Trying to replicate the past, only causes us to miss the transformative work God will do through you and in you. Their story is not your story, your story will not be another's story.

How I learned to preach emulating Vic Pentz and Earl Palmer...

God had a unique task for Elisha, it was different from Elijah's work, it was also different than Moses' work and Joshua's work.

When Joshua and the Israelites arrived at Gilgal after 40 years of wandering, seemingly aimlessly, through the wilderness, they came to Gilgal tired, discouraged, doubtful perhaps of what could be before them. And what they saw was a large and fortified city of Jericho, they said: “Truly the Lord has given it into our hands.” On that day, standing in Gilgal, their mission was conquest. But Elisha’s mission was different.

This time when the spies came to report back to Elisha they had something very different to say. “Behold the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord see, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.” “Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.” Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said: “Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.” So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word Elisha spoke.

Same city, new mission. Same context, new calling. What for one was a task of conquest for the other was an opportunity to renew and restore. Elisha’s calling was to bring healing to a situation that had one dramatic and deadly flaw, no living water.

Jesus has crossed over the Jordan, he has already traveled into that foreign land of sin and judgment and alienation from the Father’s presence. He has marched around our lives and the sin that has bound us and enslaved us, and when he shouted it is finished the walls of sin and condemnation crumbled before him. And when he walked out of that tomb, it was the true Promised Land into which he strode with confidence and purpose.

So why Jesus is so indignant in this passage, is that his followers are literally standing in Gilgal, that empty tomb with a world of promise before them and a great task ahead and they can’t help but turn their heads back on the death of things past. It is literally the most futile thing they could do, and yet we all do it. We all want to hold onto our past and clean up our former lives, redecorate the tombs that Jesus is inviting us to walk out of. Jesus didn’t spend very much time in his, he certainly doesn’t want us to get comfortable in ours.

But that means following Jesus into a new country, a new way of seeing our lives, a new mission to which he has called us. The Presbyterian Church here in Wabash of 50, 75, 100 years ago is long gone. The Christianity of America 50, 75, 100 years ago is long gone. There’s no sense in trying to recreate it. We are standing at Gilgal today, look forward.

The sign on our church lawn that maybe you notice, and maybe you need to re-notice has that beloved passage from Micah 6. What does the Lord require? To do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with our God. And the only way we can see the road ahead is from Gilgal, right here and right now.