

Holy Friendship
A Sermon on 2 Kings 2:1-12 by the Rev. Philip Major
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We are walking together with God, on a path we might call the journey of faith. In a certain way it is an individual journey; each one of us has individual experiences of joy and sorrow and unique, individual relationships with the one who created us in the image of God. Yet, Jesus and St. Paul remind us that our journey of faith is fundamentally a communal journey. Today let's consider the vital role played by the people who are closest to us. These relationships are sacred. I think of them as 'Holy Friendships'. Elijah and Elisha had this sort of relationship, a holy friendship.

You might be surprised to hear me describe the relationship between Elijah and Elisha as a holy friendship, because they were in a relationship that was not equal. Elijah was older, wiser, and more experienced than Elisha. In our times, people can be very concerned about equality in friendships and other relationships. It seems to me that life often doesn't work out that way. There are often strong, healthy friendships between people who are not equal in some way. We always need to pay attention to healthy boundaries, but it seems that God often brings people together in healthy friendships that defy our expectations for equality.

The story of Elijah and Elisha began several chapters before today's passage, back in 1 Kings 19. Back in 1 Kings, chapters 17, 18 and 19, Elijah was just living his normal, Elijah-type existence, which means he was acting as one of the true prophets of the Lord. In chapter 17 of 1 Kings, Elijah was telling the hard truth to King Ahab, the king who, according to scripture, did more evil in the sight of the Lord than all the kings who came before him. The next chapter, chapter 18, is one of the most entertaining episodes in all of scripture. Elijah won a contest of power against 450 false prophets, the ones who were telling the king everything he wanted to hear. Chapter 18 would make an excellent movie or television show. Chapter 19 continues the vivid drama; the army of the king and queen chased Elijah into the desert. Elijah travelled forty days through the desert to Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God. On the mountain Elijah listened for God in the sound of the wind, but God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then there was a fire, but God was not in the fire. Then there was the sound of sheer silence. In the silence, Elijah heard the voice of God speaking to him. Among other things, God told Elijah to anoint Elisha as the prophet who would take Elijah's place when his work came to an end.

We don't hear much about Elisha during the four chapters that lead up to today's passage, yet it appears that Elijah and Elisha worked together as prophets for at least ten years. So Elijah and Elisha knew each other well. Together they have endured at least two wars, and the wrath of King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and their son, King Ahaziah.

So it is no surprise that when the time comes for the Lord to take Elijah up to heaven, Elijah and Elisha happened to be walking down the road together. *Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel."* Elijah knows that the end has come, and he does not expect his friend to stay with him until the end. *But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."* *So they walked together, several hours down the road to Bethel. When they arrive in Bethel, Elijah and Elisha are greeted by a large company of prophets. They came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And Elisha said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."*

Elijah is on a farewell tour of sorts, visiting different groups of prophets before being taken up into heaven. Before they left Bethel, *Elijah said to Elisha, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho."* *But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."* Elisha's refusal might lead us to recall a much more ancient story, the story of Ruth, who refused to leave her mother-in-law after the death of her husband.

Eventually Elijah and Elisha came to Jericho. *The company of prophets that were in Jericho came out to greet them. A few of the wise old prophets took Elisha aside and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And Elijah answered, "Yes, of course I know! Be silent."*

Then Elijah said to Elisha, *“Stay here in Jericho; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.”* We are not surprised when Elisha responds, *“As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”* So the two of them went on, with a group of fifty prophets trailing behind them. It was several hours from Jericho to the Jordan River, but eventually the two friends arrived, and stood by the bank of the Jordan river.

Then, in a scene that reminds us of Moses parting the Red Sea, Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up so that it was in the shape of a walking staff. Elijah struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and the two of them crossed, leaving the rest of the prophets behind them, on the other side of the Jordan.

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.”* While it sounds like Elisha is asking Elijah to somehow make him twice as powerful as Elijah was, Elisha's request is related to inheritance traditions in ancient Israel. In most times and places, the first-born son was given a double share of the inheritance at the death of his father. Let's observe that this rule is broken over and over again in the Biblical narrative. The point is that Elisha is asking to be treated like a first-born son in the tradition of ancient Israel, and inherit Elijah's prophetic power and role.

Elijah responded to Elisha, saying, “You have asked a hard thing. You have asked for something that only God can give. 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 the magnificent, perplexing scene. Elisha seems to understand he might be seeing a vision of his own role as a prophet, leading the nation of Israel into war. He calls out, *“Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!”* But when Elisha could no longer see him, in a sign of his grief, he grasped his tunic and tore it in half.

I'm guessing that your experiences, walking the journey of faith with your own friends, have not been quite so dramatic as this. Yet I hope that your sacred friendships are similar to the friendship between Elijah and Elisha in a few ways.

Like them, I hope you have friendships that last for many years. Like Elijah and Elisha, I hope you have friends who see the gifts God has given you, and encourage you in exercising the gift of your life. I urge you to seek and develop friendships that nourish and sustain you in doing God's work.

We see in the story of Elijah and Elisha there is a mature combination of loyalty and independence. Elijah does not expect Elisha to accompany him during the final parts of his journey. Elisha is not self-centered. He is not demanding and whiny. When Elijah asks, *“Tell me what I may do for you?”* Elisha tells what is in his heart, which is to take up the work of Elijah after he is gone. Elijah does not make promises that he cannot keep. The two prophets are strongly connected with one another, but they do not expect the other person to meet their needs.

This is the kind of friendship God intends for us. God's intention is for us to have strong connections with others, without being dependent or emotionally enmeshed with them.

Finally, let's pay attention to the fact that Elisha grieves when the relationship is over. Grief is important in our lives. Grief is a strange kind of emptiness, and, at least at times, emptiness is important. People want to avoid it at all costs, but grief is part of life. Eventually grief is part of any sort of relationship that might be described with the word 'love'. If your relationship was a relationship of telling the truth and trusting another person, when your friend is gone, you end up grieving. We have the opportunity to grieve the end of a relationship to the degree we have experienced relationships of true friendship and connection.

The Holy Friendships in your life are a gift of God's grace; we have not done anything to earn or deserve them. So we strive to be, like Elijah and Elisha, trustworthy and honest with our friends. We open our hearts to be in relationships with friends who encourage us to use and develop the gifts God has given us. We pray for the grace to be mature in our friendships, to be connected and loyal, but not emotionally dependent on others. We give thanks to God for the dear people God has given us, as companions on our journey of faith.