

14 February 2021: The Last Sunday after the Epiphany 2 Kings 2:1-12

The account of Elijah's incredible ascent into heaven is one of my favorite Bible stories. I like passages that require some digging to discover the meaning. This is certainly such a passage.

Young Elisha has been Elijah's man-Friday and companion for a while. Elijah has regularly gotten himself into serious trouble; the threat of execution has been a continuing possibility and not just from the political-religious establishment. One of the signs of a true prophet is the message they proclaim from God makes everyone angry because no one is exempted. As a teacher once quipped: "Prophets do not get many dinner invitations!" To be Elijah's protegee was dangerous, since—as Jesus' said—*the disciple is not above the teacher* (Matthew 10:24). Elijah was so infamous other prophets recognized Elijah on sight during his final journey and warned Elisha that something was about to happen. The instances of Elisha refusing to leave Elijah in the face of danger testify to Elisha's connection and dedication to Elijah.

Elisha's request for a 'double portion' of Elijah's spirit may seem odd, even arrogant. Elisha is not asking that he be twice the prophet. To understand the request, we must know something of the Torah's inheritance laws. When a father died, the firstborn son received a double portion of the estate. If there were two sons, the elder received 2/3, the younger 1/3; if three sons, the eldest received 50%, the younger two 25% each. In asking for a double portion of Elijah's spirit Elisha asked that he be Elijah's 'heir,' his successor as God's prophet.

This is indeed what happens, and it has to do with the curious incident of Elijah dividing the Jordan River by touching it with his mantle; an allusion to the Israelites entering the Promised Land. Unfortunately, the confirmation of Elisha's inheritance as Elijah's successor is not included in today's reading. Here is how the passage continues: (Elisha) *picked up the mantle of Elijah...and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan...and struck the water, saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, ...it parted...and Elisha went over. ...the company of prophets who were at Jericho...declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha"* (2 Kings 2:13-15).

I hope you are as impressed by this deeper meaning of the story as I am. However, if you and I are only impressed then the reading has not really come alive for us. Might we not, each one, be motivated to ask for a double portion, too? I trust there is someone in your life—past or present, living or dead—whom you admire for their faithfulness, their love, their gentleness or forgiving spirit or generosity; someone whom you consider an example of godly living. Ask for a double portion of their spirit. Do not just admire them, but invite the Holy Spirit to teach you, grow you, so work with, in, and through you that you become their spiritual 'heir apparent,' their successor.

This is more than a romantic notion or pious fantasy. When children we learn how to be adults by observing the adults in our lives. In the same way, we learn how to be Christians by seeing examples of Christ-like living around us. We all know that what most deeply influences anyone is not what others tell us to do, think, and say, but what we observe others doing, thinking, saying day by day. We are more influenced, and we will more readily influence others, through evidence of Christianity than by reports about Christianity.

Whenever I am in our beautiful parish, when I drive by our campus, when I even think fleetingly about Calvary, I think of Br. Lawrence and his 40+ years of ministry in Americus; I imagine the many other clergy who have faithfully ministered here; my mind floods with gratitude for the thousands of lay people who have prayed, worshiped, labored, and sacrificially given of their time, talent, and treasure since 1864. I want a double portion of their spirit, don't you? When I think of current parishioners and friends of the parish, I remember that we are beneficiaries of a priceless treasure and we, like our spiritual forebears, are called, as good trustees, to pass on the past and present for a yet more glorious future. I ask for a double portion of your spirit.

You may be thinking that you are unequal to being a spiritual heir of someone like Br. Lawrence, or anyone I admire. There is one antidote for such nonsense: Get over yourself. This is not about you, certainly not about your self-assessment of your gifts and abilities. Get a grip, and offer yourself to God, and God will make of you what is needed. Grab someone's mantle, strike the water and ask, "Where now is the Lord God of my spiritual mothers and fathers? Where is the Lord God of Calvary Church?"

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.