

Old Testament Lesson—2 Kings 2:1-12

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. 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." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; 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 and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

New Testament Lesson—Acts 1:6-14

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

We live in extraordinary times. The world is changing; and the pace of that change seems to speed up with every passing year. Doesn't it?

Three years ago, the pandemic came along and sped up those changes even more—exacerbating certain trends we were already seeing for a while.

And, of course, the Church is wrestling with these cultural shifts in real time—trying to figure out what traditions to keep, what we can let go of, and how to adapt in ways that are both faithful and in ways that (hopefully) won't alienate too many in the process.

These are serious issues to consider: How can we both “meet people where they are” and not fall into the trap of church consumerism? How can we “meet people where they are” without giving them everything they want or ask for?

“You know, I like your church a lot but I just wish you had a service at 10:40. I really like this church but the one across town has separate Sunday school classes for third and fourth graders. That just works better for us. I really like your church but the one we visited last week has its pulpit on the left side and we really prefer that.”

One of the things I keep hearing more and more these days from both colleagues and scholars is that all ministry is transitional. All ministry is transitional ministry.

In other words, a huge part of what pastors are called to do these days—a really important part of my job and Dave's job is to help our communities navigate and make sense of all these changes.

We're called to name and address the anxiety many of us have—to be open and honest about the ways things are and how we got here. Yes, for a lot of us, the Church today looks and feels less and less like it did when we were growing up. And that can be scary.

Change is hard. And lots of it happening all at once can be overwhelming.

Now (praise the Lord!), we're part of the Reformed tradition! That is, our way of understanding the Church in the world has transition built into its very foundation. Change is part of our DNA as Presbyterians: “Reformed and always to be reformed according to the Word of God” as our motto goes.

Ideally (all things considered), we'd work together to listen, and to notice, and discern where and how God is working in the midst of all these changes—maybe in spite of all these changes. Now, admittedly, that can be a tall order. It's easier said than done, perhaps, to say with confidence—to *know* for a fact that God is working in this specific way at this specific time.

Where is Christ in the shift from membership confirmation to missional confirmation? Where is Christ in the shift from being program-focused to relationship-focused? Where is Christ when our goal begins to turn from attracting people inside our building to meeting people at their point of need out in the community?

Where is Christ in all these changes—in all these broad cultural shifts? Thankfully, our lesson this morning from Acts has something to say about this. The Bible may not answer all of our questions (I mean, what fun would that be?), but we do know where Christ is. More on that in a moment...

As a matter of fact, both of these stories—these two ascension stories—are taking place in the face of shifting sands and changing tides. Both the ascension of Elijah and the ascension of Jesus happen with big transitions on the horizon.

There are so many fascinating parallels between these two passages.

Both ascensions involve a transfer of leadership—leaving behind a deep well of grief their communities have to deal with.

And (let's remember), both of them also include a promise to those called to carry on the work of their leaders—a promise that they'll be equipped with what they need to succeed—that they'll be given everything necessary to bear fruit in an uncertain world—a world that feels constantly in flux—a world we can relate to today...

In the case of Elisha who refuses to leave the side of his beloved teacher, he is promised a “double-portion” of the same Spirit that animated and empowered his master. In other words, his teacher promised he would be all right—that he'd be more than capable of taking up the prophetic mantle to serve God's people in a new era.

And we see that promise affirmed as Elisha watches his mentor ascend to heaven in one of the most epic exits ever.

In the case of the disciples in Acts, faced with having to say goodbye to their Teacher for the second time, the risen Christ gives them a similar promise: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

In other words, they're going to be all right, too. They, too, are more than capable of carrying on the ministry of Jesus and serving God's people in this new age.

And, yes, we see this promise fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes with power and purpose and sets the newborn Church ablaze with hope. But let's put a pin in that until next Sunday...

As you know, we've been talking about prayer for several weeks now. We've lifted up how central prayer is to our faith journeys. We've shown that prayer takes many forms and that God takes all of them to heart.

This morning, though, I want you to notice how both ascension stories emphasize prayer as a powerful and appropriate response to life's uncertainties and the anxiety that change often brings.

Personally, I don't think there's ever a *wrong* time to pray; but I think an argument can be made that our prayers are especially potent when we offer them during times of great upheaval and change. In those moments, our prayers connect us with the Source of all faith and confidence and set our feet on solid rock.

And that connection with the Almighty that's established through the gift of prayer becomes, in the words of Martin Luther, a “bulwark never failing.” Not even two millennia's worth of schism and reformation can erode the walls of our Mighty Fortress, my friends.

As Elijah ascends to heaven, he and his God hear the prayer of his faithful protégé: *Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"*

After the risen Christ ascends to the right hand of the Father, upon returning to Jerusalem, we're told that *“All [the disciples] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”*

Both Elisha and Jesus' disciples respond to major transitions and the unknown road ahead with a trust they express through prayer.

And (you know) in my experience, it all comes down to trust. It all comes down to trust—and not some passive, static kind of trust. I'm not saying it's easy. No, I'm talking about an active, dynamic, defiant, countercultural kind of trust—the kind that requires us to make a decision every day—a decision to put our faith and hope in the living God because we believe in the promises God has made.

So why *should* we trust? How *can* we trust when faced with so much change, when faced with a Church in transformation—faced with so much anxiety—with a world that seems like it's

going in the wrong direction? Well, I'm here to tell you today there is good news, siblings in Christ!

We *can* and *should* put our trust in God because we know God's keeps God's promises. We've inherited a tradition—a legacy of kept promises. We've witnessed the promises of God being fulfilled in this age in real time—even despite an increasingly secularized society—despite the trials of a pandemic—despite an age where justice seems more perverted than ever.

The story of Scripture is consistent, my friends. It tells us that God's people have been here before. Maybe not in this exact situation, but we've been in similar circumstances in the past. The Church has witnessed great upheavals before. We've faced Reformation before. We've looked at monumental change directly in the eye before and God...was...faithful.

Most important for now is trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide and sustain us—to hem us in on all sides—to go before us and ahead of us—to prepare the way for us—just as Christ promised...

...the same Christ (by the way) who taught us *how* to pray...the same Christ who prayed, "Father forgive them"...the same Christ who now sits at the right hand of God. That same Christ not only prays for us today but has gifted us with his Holy Spirit to intercede for us when words fail us or when we'd rather not pray at all.

Friends, we know major life transitions are going to challenge us. We know this. For example, we graduate, we move to new places, our children move out of the house, the church we grew up in closes its doors, we start attending church online. Change is inevitable and it comes in many forms, yes, but the promises of God are forever.

And prayer is our gift—our direct line to the One Who doesn't change—the Source of our security, Whose love is steadfast and sure.

Let me close with a couple questions that were just gnawing at me yesterday...

Do we pray because we trust? Or does our trust lead us to pray? (Repeat)

And then it hit me...

Why not both? Or, maybe, it doesn't matter. It seems to me that the more we pray, the more we'll trust in God's promises. And I also think the more we trust in those promises, the more we'll find ourselves in communion with God.

And maybe, just maybe, that trust will lead us to not only greater fellowship with God, but greater fellowship with each other.

May it be so.

Amen.