

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh PA  
on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B  
February 11, 2024**

*II Kings II:1-12*

If you knew this was your last day on earth, what would you do? How would you use your last 24 hours? With whom would you want to spend that precious time?

I suspect no one would say, I will squeeze in a few more meetings, check everyone else's social media, or find some more things to be upset or worry about. Some might want to indulge in favorite junk foods, binge watch their favorite shows, and throw caution to the wind.

Most of us would likely consider some version of spending time with family and friends and telling them what a difference they have made in our lives. We may want to look at photos and remember where it all started. We would look back at the seasons of growth and learning that made us who we are. We might think about all the occasions we faced challenges, sometimes losing and sometimes overcoming it. We might want to pray to ask forgiveness of mistakes and to give thanks. We might ask, what is next? They are all ways to reflect what has made my life meaningful and worth living.

If you knew this was your last day on earth, what would you do? That is what the prophet Elijah, from our II Kings reading, was facing. This story is his response to that question. What he chose to do was spend his last moments with his protégé, Elisha. Usually one hears eh-lie-sha but I will use the Hebrew to distinguish better with eh-lee-sha.

Elijah was the old prophet and teacher while Elisha was his student or disciple. They were not related but grew to consider each other as father and son. This was a mentor passing on his knowledge and wisdom and affection to the next generation.

Elijah lived during a time the people of Israel were on a long decline. Earlier in their story as a people, they had been delivered from slavery and gained their freedom, received the Law or Bible to guide them, and had moved into the Promised Land.

Over time, they had forsaken their worship of Yahweh and followed instead a local Canaanite, fertility deity named Baal. More and more Jews began to follow this other religion rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel... the god of their ancestors. They had been warned of this before entering the holy land but did it anyway. Elijah rose up in the midst of this. He was to be a sign that Yahweh was to be their one true God and not anyone or anything else.

Elijah performed many miracles. He raised a widow's dead son to new life. He was the one who looked for the Lord in a mighty wind, an earthquake, and then fire but heard God in a still small voice. Twice he bested the priests of Baal in front of everyone. And the people believed and turned from their ways back to God.

Elijah became a major figure in Jewish identity and hope. He was thought to be the forerunner of the Messiah. That is why some thought John the Baptist was Elijah returned pointing the way for Jesus. It is why the great prophet appears with the Lawgiver Moses with Jesus on the mountain at the Transfiguration from our gospel.

And so we find him today at the end of a faithful and fruitful life. Elijah believed it was his last day on earth. And what did he do with his last 24 hours? He spent it with his protégé, his friend of about ten years who would become his successor. Together, they did a type of farewell tour and visited the areas of Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho and the Jordan River. If you consult a map, the journey makes no sense. They seemed to go in circles to end up near where they began.

The places, however, are highly significant and symbolic. Gilgal was the site the Israelites first entered the Promised Land. Gilgal was the place of beginning. It symbolizes where we start our faith journey and vocation... like visiting your old school or hometown. They went back to where it all started as a reflection on one's whole life getting back to their roots.

Bethel, the second stop, means "house of God." It was the place Jacob had a dream of a ladder to Heaven and later where his name was changed to Israel. Bethel was a place of identity formation and learning. It represented a time to grow, pray, give thanks, make mistakes, and start again. It was a symbol of learning to wear the mantle Elisha was to claim as his own.

Jericho, the third stop, was a walled city and the site of the first battle the Israelites had in the Promised Land, where God was faithful to the divine promises. You may remember "...and the walls came tumbling down." Jericho represents the place of challenge within or without. It symbolizes things we have overcome, things at which we failed, battles we are still fighting.

At each place, Elijah tells the younger prophet to stay behind. Each time, Elisha states he will not leave. It is like the reverse of Peter denying Jesus three times. The younger one has three chances to turn back but stays faithful and goes to each of these places of memory together.

Also, in each of the three towns, a company of prophets tells Elisha that the Lord was going to take Elijah away from him. That is, they thought he was going to die.

Finally, they make it back to the Jordan River with 50 prophets watching from a distance. Elijah rolled up his mantle, his cloak, and struck the water with it. The expression "take up the mantle" comes from this story. The mantle is Elijah's cloak or cape that symbolizes a transmission of responsibility or leadership. When the two first met, Elijah had draped his mantle around Elisha's shoulders signifying he was now a prophet and his successor (I Kings 19:19-21).

After striking the water with this symbol of authority, it parted so the two crossed on dry ground. All the others were left behind. This recalls Moses parting the Red Sea (Exodus 14). More importantly, the Israelites first entered the Promised Land by crossing on dry ground across the Jordan River led by Joshua (Joshua 3). It is a reminder we are never alone. Others have gone before us to illuminate the way.

As his last day on earth continues, Elijah had the presence of mind to ask his protégé, "What do you want me to do for you, before I am taken from you?" The response is strange. "Give me a double share of your spirit." That is, give me a double share of the inheritance. The spirit or power of God you had, please give me an extra portion of that. The younger is told if he sees Elijah

leaving, he will be granted that request. Later, he performed twice as many miracles as his teacher so the request seemed to work.

As they continued walking and talking, chariots and horses of fire separated the two. Elijah ascended to Heaven in a whirlwind. That is a mythic way of expressing he was taken into the presence of God. This is the first, clear reference to someone going to Heaven in the Bible. Almost every occasion before this refers to Sheol or the place of the dead usually imagined as down in the earth where everyone was joined to their ancestors. It was not a place of suffering but nor was it bliss. When we say, in the Apostles Creed, Jesus descended to the dead, that is what it refers to. In his resurrection, he unlocked the gates of Sheol, from the inside, to invite everyone into the heavenly realm where Jesus, himself, ascended. Elijah becomes a forerunner to this.

At the end of the scene, Elisha sees his mentor and father figure depart from him. He is alone and takes the traditional posture of mourning by tearing his clothes in two. Later, Elisha took up the mantle of his teacher, the symbol of his vocation and his mentor, and made it his own.

This sermon has followed a circuitous route, similar to the two prophets, to end where it began. If this was your last day on earth, what would you do? Would you symbolically visit the places of memory and meaning where it all started, your Gilgal? Would you go where you learned and grew, your Bethel? Would you remember the places of conflict overcome and hope, your Jericho? Would you dare to imagine crossing the threshold from one world to the next? Would you do that with the ones you love and hold most dear? That is what Elijah did on his last day.

For a life with more meaning and hope, what can and should you *stop* doing? What can or should you *start* doing? We only have only life with an uncertain but precious time. How do you cultivate and curate the time you have? If you knew this was your last day or month or year or decade on earth, what would you do? Why are you not doing that now?

*Note:*

Genesis 5:24, there is a reference to Enoch being “taken” by God.

Genesis 28:10-28 Jacob had a dream of angels ascending and descending to Heaven on a ladder or stairway.

Acts 1:9–11 the risen Christ ascends bodily into heaven.