

1-24-10 1 Kings 19:19-21; 21:20-22, 27 “Departure Attendant” by Richard Boatman

¹⁹ So Elijah went and found Elisha son of Shaphat plowing a field. There were twelve teams of oxen in the field, and Elisha was plowing with the twelfth team. Elijah went over to him and threw his cloak across his shoulders and then walked away. ²⁰ Elisha left the oxen..., ran after Elijah, and said to him, “First let me go and kiss my father and mother good-bye, and then I will go with you!” Elijah replied, “Go on back, but think about what I have done to you.” ²¹ So Elisha returned to his oxen and slaughtered them. He used the wood from the plow to build a fire to roast them...He passed around the meat to the townspeople, and they all ate. Then he went with Elijah as his attendant.

The cloak that Elijah wore represented God’s anointing upon him, i.e. the presence of the Holy Spirit. From the “cutting place” to the “refining place” to the “place of conquest” to the “place of despair,” God’s presence had been with the prophet of power. Elijah was now in his final movement—one that would last nearly a decade—the “place of departure.” His final act was his greatest responsibility: the choosing and training of his successor.

Elijah draped his cloak, the **cloak of calling** around the broad shoulders of young Elisha. The call had come. God’s call does not always come to us at a convenient time...it fact it is rarely convenient. There are always things more pressing—demanding schedules and financial priorities. Elisha’s family was wealthy. Few in Israel could claim more than one set of oxen in order to plow their small portions of land. But Elisha’s family had twelve pair. It was the equivalent of today’s large farming operation. And right in the middle of plowing, God’s call came.

In our Tuesday evening class on relationships, the married men are writing love letters to their spouses this week. It’s something I also assign all the couples that come for pre-marriage counseling. Quite some time ago, one of the young men wrote a beautiful love letter to his fiancé. I had talked with him about the substance of the letter but not about the timing of delivering it to her. I had assumed he would create some romantic ambiance, perhaps dinner with a rose, and serve up the letter with a box of chocolates. Instead, he casually handed it to her while she was watching a war documentary.

God’s calling sometimes seems this abrupt. It surely must have for Elisha. But his response was equal to the call. He immediately left the farming operation and ran to Elijah: “First let me go and kiss my father and mother good-bye, and then I will go with you!” Elijah granted it, but before his young protégé left, he gave him a subject for meditation—“**Think about what I have done to you.**” In other words, think about what it means to be called by God.

Called by God—it is the focus for many of the Apostle Paul’s greetings. To the church at Rome he writes: “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle...[to] you [who] also are the called of Jesus Christ.” To the church at Corinth he says, “Paul called as an apostle...to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling...” And in Paul’s second letter to *his* young protégé Timothy he instructs: “Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord...who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace...”

What does it mean to be called to “abide in Christ”? What does Romans 8:28 mean: “All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are *called according to his purpose*”? It seems that to abide in Christ’s presence and purpose takes attentiveness...**attending to greatness**. It is simple but not easy. Listening is demanding labor; it takes spiritual energy to “attend to my words.”

But like Elisha, our call is to abide. Elisha made it clear to both his community and family that he took this call seriously. He slaughtered the oxen and broke up his plow for a wood fire, roasting the beasts and feeding the townspeople a feast. His identity was no longer farmer Elisha; he was now prophet in training. His primary training was going to come by **attending to greatness**, “shadowing” Elijah.

Years ago when attending a community college, three or four us “older” students went out after an evening class. Over a taco and with my mind very preoccupied, I asked my new classmate Lawrence what he did for a living. He went on about it for quite awhile. When he was done, I asked again, “Now what is it you do for a living?” He gave me the strangest look...a look that said, *either you’ve lost your mind or you’ve totally ignored me*. I think it was the latter...hmmm. Lawrence had caught me being completely inattentive to his words and presence. It was a little embarrassing but a good teaching moment. It takes work to really attend to someone else...to really listen and observe, whether as an apprentice to someone highly skilled or to the Holy Spirit as we study Scripture and commune.

Elisha would attend to Elijah his master for many years. It is possible that during the six or so years of silence that Elijah was developing and instructing schools of prophets from the 7000 faithful to Yahweh. But there are some things you can’t learn from a book...or scroll. In our next passage, Elisha is going to experience firsthand Elijah’s confronting of the evil king:

²⁰ “So, my enemy, you have found me!” Ahab exclaimed to Elijah. “Yes,” Elijah answered, “I have come because you have sold yourself to what is evil in the LORD’s sight. ²¹ So now the LORD says, ‘I will bring disaster on you and consume you. I will destroy...your family...for you have made me very angry and have led Israel into sin.’...²⁷ But when Ahab heard this message, he tore his clothing, dressed in burlap, and fasted...and went about in deep mourning.

It is a rather remarkable turn around. Prior to this, Ahab tried to buy a plot of ground from one of his subjects. But Naboth was unwilling to sell his vineyard as Hebrew teaching forbade it. Ahab came home brooding, so Jezebel took matters into her own hands having Naboth set up as a traitor and then killed. Ahab was complicit and now as the prophet approached, he was working in his new vineyard.

Notice that **Ahab refers to Elijah as the “enemy.”** Isn’t it interesting when we’re sinning how disruptive a righteous presence is. Ahab, as always, considered Elijah so judgmental. But not surprisingly, Elijah isn’t into political correctness or diplomacy. He simply **declares the disaster** to come upon Ahab and his family because the king had “led Israel into sin.”

Elijah and Ahab have been players in the real-life drama for ten years or more. The tension has been thick and the numerous confrontations uncomfortable. That’s what makes Ahab’s **repentance so remarkable**. Ahab seems to finally get it. Sadly, though he personally gets it, the evil bent of his influence will continue.

There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to sharing the gospel and seeing others come to repentance. Some respond to confrontation; others to gentle understanding; still others to intellectual challenge. We must learn to attend to the Spirit for guidance in each opportunity. In fact, I conclude today with a passage from the letter of Jude that gives us aid towards seeing remarkable repentance:

“But you beloved, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit, staying right at the center of God’s love [*Notice, whatever our approach in presenting the gospel, it is to be immersed in the love of God.*], keeping your arms open and outstretched, ready for the mercy of our Master, Jesus Christ [*Take note of that... ‘ready for...mercy’*]...And have mercy on some, who are doubting [*They are seeking but struggling with doubts and trust—The Message translation says, ‘Go easy on them.’*]; save others, snatching them out of the fire [*Be bold and abrupt...intervene*] and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garments polluted by the flesh [*The Message says, ‘Be tender with sinners, but not soft on sin. The sin itself stinks to high heaven.’*]” (vs. 20-23).