

## DECISION

Texts on Sunday, July 7, 2013

2 Kings 2: 1-14; Luke 9:51-62

The stories you have heard this morning are master/disciple stories. They tell of the moment of decision to leave everything and go. These stories are about you and me. If they were merely about the old heroes, we'd find them only behind glass in libraries. But they are here because they are about that moment of decision for possibility in the crisis you are facing. The door of the eternal is here: the infinite in a moment.

Or not. If perhaps you think, *There is no great decision before me now*, that means that for you, discipleship is dormant. This is not a bad thing, but let us see it clearly. In Luke's story, Jesus calls several individuals to follow him, but they do not sense the crisis in the call; they have ordinary attachments to attend to. Jesus is not annoyed. It is just not time for them to become disciples; no one is always a disciple. If you sense no call to rise and follow, then at present you have no master. Or, you are your own master; you are at rest and discipleship is dormant. It is as if the divine master said, "Elisha, stay here," and Elisha replied, "O.K." Would that not be obedience?

When a teacher tells a student to stay behind, it means only that she is not ready to go on. As we say, this is not a bad thing. If one is not ready, then to go on, unprepared, would be the bad thing. A sad thing, however, is our cultural assumption that we may ignore the question of preparing to be ready to rise and go, to become human. American culture wants to flatten the path of the soul's development; to insist that everyone is on a journey and every journey is on the same level, except, of course, those of athletes and rich people. Someone observed that American Protestants want the church to teach the children and bless the adults with a sermon—just the opposite of Jesus' way, who blessed children and taught the adults—or some adults, at any rate: the learners, the disciples. Most of the time, our discipleship is dormant. "First, let me bury my father," we say. Let me keep my appointments. Let me stick with what's stuck, and defer decision.

When your true master speaks, it is like a voice in the night. Can you even hear it when you are so drowsied by your old ways? If you are angry, or worried, or grumpy; if you are formal, or shallow or dutiful, or dependable and busy, or sad or cynical or ill or clever—the list is endless, isn't it?—then you have your life on your own terms, and the master's word cannot be heard. Whatever story of our self keeps coming to our lips and our thoughts, that is our master and the governor of our state of mind, whatever that is.

But sometimes—I can't explain it; we must call it grace—sometimes you do awake in the night to the voice of your true master. The master's word is not a simple command, as to a soldier or a servant. The word may be, "*Stay here, Elisha,*" but now you hear a call to disobey it, to decide. Are you ready? Are you ready to not rehearse your old story, but to let go of the excuses and go into an open field with no boundary? Not mother, not brother, not dutiful child? Not troubled, addicted, handsome, out of shape, shy, expert, unreligious, deep, dumb, unreliable, wealthy, poor—but go with no label? Are you ready to not go to the fridge or the cabinet or the computer, if that's how you defer decision? Are you ready to not quit the hard talk someone needs you to stay in? Are you ready to give your master your attention? This is what prayer is: attention. Here is the field of the disciple's decision.

Discipleship is not passive. If you are waiting to be told that it is time to be going on, you are not ready to be going on. Yet sometimes, in the master's voice—*Elisha, stay here*—you feel the test which the master is also always offering you. And then, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, you decide: "*As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.*" I am ready to grow; I am ready to go.

Now you will follow the master down to the river, and over Jordan. On the way, the master will test you again and again. In Bethel: *Stay here, Elisha*. In Jericho: *Stay here, Elisha*. See where the master is going: He is called east, and even easter. The days are drawing near for him to be taken up. He is going over Jordan, to the easter edge of the land, beyond the holy land. The master is going beyond religion and tradition. He is going to divide the waters and make a strange new exodus into the land of the enemy. Once more, you hear *Stay here!* but now you come to your own decision, and cross over. "*As the Lord lives, and as you your self live, I will not leave you.*"

But let's hold up here. What is the point of all this seriousness about discipleship? Let's not be romantic about discipleship and transformation. Isn't it enough, as everyone says, to try to be a good person? Isn't it enough to be respectful and peaceable with friends and loves and reasonable commitments; to be a good citizen and enjoy life as much as possible? What is wrong with that? I think we must have no simple answer to that question. To a man looking to him for a decision, Jesus said: "Friend, who set me to be a judge over you?" (Luke 12.14) Discipleship is not a rule for everyone. But neither is it the stuffy rooms of traditionalism and institutionalism.

One Sunday here at the door of the sanctuary, one of you said to me,

“I’m not very religious.” The speaker was not bragging, but neither was this a guilty confession; rather, it seemed a bemused confusion, as if testing the ice for a skate. The speaker was glad to sense spiritual room here, but unsure how much of the burden of church rituals and culture she could support. I said, “You know, neither was Jesus.” Neither was Jesus very religious. Let’s make a distinction between being religious and being a disciple.

If “being religious” means performing the rituals and services of one’s religion, then the gospel stories do not portray Jesus as a very religious man. Here and there, he goes to synagogue, here and there he is praying, though not very conventionally. Compassionate, connected, subversive, humane, wise, trusting in God—absolutely; but not religious. And, with a few exceptions, the great figures of the Old Testament show up this way too. They are not religious. In fact, they are suspicious of what’s religious, as was Jesus.

Being religious has so often meant accommodation with domination. So often it has meant that the religious institution trains religious teachers to infuse believers with a worldview that lulls them into making peace with the evils of the greedy and the powerful, while tormenting them to apply all their seriousness to personal sins, theirs or others’. Such religion is handmaiden to empire and domination; that is the Bible’s summary judgment and that is why the servants of God are not religious in the conventional sense. No, they are blacksmiths. They heat the religious in the fires of God. They hammer the religious on the anvil of truth. By divine power, they forge God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. Their whole hope is to bring a person to decision, to a moment when he sees that he is connected to the whole web of being and responsible and alive to all things; and that therefore, old ways of believing and old ways of doing are not necessary, and not good when they stand in the way of God’s will—and that the impossible is possible.

The seriousness of decision is not for everyone. But let us guard the word “disciple” for those with the learner’s mind, for those who wonder what is possible on earth, as it is in heaven. For the stories of Elijah and his disciple Elisha, and the stories of Jesus and his disciples, are all of them about decisions taken not for oneself, not for a good career or for family or to struggle for institutional survival; why, the decisions of the Bible’s disciples are not even taken for the sake of personal salvation. These disciples have crossed over from that promised land where they were in pursuit of happiness. They have decided to inscribe their names on a declaration of interdependence with the web of all being. Therefore, they are not about being religious. They are about being justice. For the crisis they face, like the crisis you are facing, when your master shows you who you are and where you are going, is a crisis of setting right the relationships among all creatures.

Riverside Church, over the next two months, we are going to get to know Elisha, the servant of God, in the crisis of justice. When you know these stories, I hope you will find you know Jesus better than ever. And may you sense God pressing you more than ever to decide, Whose side are you on?

Then, like Elisha, may you boldly ask to inherit a double portion of your master's spirit, for even though your request may not be granted, it is good to desire so much; to ask for the power to give such full attention to the groaning world that is before us; to ask, *Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?* and bring down upon the waters still separating what must be made one the mantle left to you by your master, and cross over to minister to your sleeping nation, and speak to them in the night a word that can be heard for decision.

And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?  
And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here  
Among these dark satanic mills?  
Bring me my bow of burning gold!  
Bring me my arrows of desire!  
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!  
Bring me my chariot of fire!  
I will not cease from mental fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land.

—William Blake

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