

DECISION

Text on Sunday, June 27, 2010

2 Kings 2: 1-14

Wherever the Jordan appears in the Bible, train your heart to listen for a song of liberation. The great spirituals affirm this, but you might wonder, *Why the Jordan?* In ancient memory, the Jordan is the water that separates wilderness and wandering from identity and self-possession—the waters of awareness and new birth. We know the story of Moses' parting the waters of the Red Sea so that his people might flee the evil of slavery in Egypt—"Pharaoh's army got drowned. Oh, Mary don't you weep"—but on the other side, they passed into a generation of confusion, not freedom. In other words, becoming aware of the bondage you hate, though necessary, is not enough for freedom. As the ancient tales tell it, it was only after Joshua inherited authority from his master Moses, and Moses was dead, that the people came down to the waters of the Jordan at the end of forty years of wandering in the east, and there by God's power Joshua parted the waters, as his master Moses had the Red Sea, and the people passed through the waters of awareness into the promised land.

Have you spent forty years wandering in wilderness before coming to a decision at your Jordan? If you have, you know that the number forty is not literal, but belongs to the poetry of a song. Two things are needed to transform bondage into liberty. Yes, that hatred for your captivity, whatever it was. But then, you must come to so love the life you are given that you never put it at risk for any lesser gods or small satisfactions. The Jordan stands for that awareness, that liberty, that decision, after a long wilderness.

Now Elijah and Elisha are coming down to the Jordan. Again the master will first part the waters, now going east, pioneer into mystery. But as glorious as is the vision of Elijah rising in the chariots of fire, this story is basically Elisha's story, how the disciple comes to the waters of awareness when the master is departed, and takes his authority, his identity, his self-possession, and goes over Jordan, going west again into promised land with power.

Elisha's passage at the Jordan was first told many hundreds of years after Israel first told its central story of liberation—the Moses and Joshua stories. The parallels in the later story are so strong that we must not suppose them to be mere facts about something that happened. They are more dearly held than that. Elisha at the Jordan is like a dream in Israel's night, a story that calls to her through generations of apathy and division. The story of Elisha is how the song of liberation for a whole people came again to prepare them to pass

through the waters of awareness, to trust in divine power alive in the land, according to the promise. I don't know whether the story of Elisha happened as they say. I only know that it is true. A whole people can awake to decision at the verge of the Jordan.

Stonewall was that, forty years ago, don't you think? You hear it in the opening lines of Audre Lorde's poem, "A Litany for Survival."

"For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone . . . "

For a very great many people who received the good news of gay liberation, the decision came, necessarily, by way of separation not only from a closeted past but also from the normative, anti-gay culture, and especially from the church created by that culture. For those of us who never lived at that shoreline of decision, its contours, its sounds, its smell can hardly be imagined, though a poet helps. Certainly it is no surprise that for many, religion itself, if not the very the promise of God, had to be abandoned. It was a question of self-possession, of liberation, of awareness, of crossing over. For tens by tens of thousands, the path led away from the gods of our fathers.

Audre Lorde's poem, published in 1978, says more of why:

"And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning . . .
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive"

For very many, gay liberation and religion have remained split, enemies. The left, liberal, and progressive largely abandoned religion as a province of ignorance, fear, and terrorism. The right abandon whomever they wish in order to embrace a religion that will not challenge "the natural order." Fortunately, dappling the landscape in cities and towns are churches where this dividing wall is broken down. Those who were far off and those were

near have come together, and it is beautiful to behold. Yet even in such churches, often enough, the peace is purchased by giving up on the Bible, taking it for a benighted anthology of fears and hatreds., save for Brother Jesus, of course, who some prefer to imagine got his wisdom from India. In other words, any tradition except my own.

But that is not the way of Elisha. It is not the way of Jesus. The story of Elijah and Elisha is first a master/disciple story. You have heard parables of this kind from around the world. They take you inside the paradox of decision in the disciple, whether to do as told or to accept a new, inner authority and act. This decision is a paradox because it is taken against the master's advice, which is clear. Three times, Elijah says: *Stay here!* Yet three times, Elisha decides to not obey. Or, we might more aptly say, *decides to obey a voice different from the plain sense of his master's.*

It's strange. If you are waiting to be told that you are ready, you are not ready. Discipleship is not only a relationship of receiving, for the master cannot give you understanding or vision which has not yet arisen in you. Yet sometimes in the master's voice—*Elisha, stay here*—you hear the test of your readiness, which the master is also always offering, but ever indirectly. And then, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, you decide: I am ready to go.

As you well know, the grave and willful error of the right wing in its false imaging of homosexuality is to assert endlessly that the decision inherent in homosexuality is to decide to *be gay* and thereby to disobey God and the natural order. But you hardly need it said to you that there never was such a decision. It cannot be found. No, the decision was this. To not deny yourself, but to pass over into self-possession, into promise, into pride. And this, too: the decision not to use another, or to be used. And this too: the decision not to give in or hide in the culture, but to insist like Elisha that by your gift the power of God can again come alive for the whole people; that you will enter the land of promise for healing and hope.

This is the message of necessary disobedience, of a different listening. Not disobedience to God, of course, for hearing God truly is the highest expression of self-possession and awareness. But the word that inspires you to come to a decision to say No at the right time, to the right authorities (that is, the wrong) —the necessity of it, the difficulty of it, the errors of pride and rebellion which often mask themselves as divine disobedience—this Word is sent to you all through the Bible, not in spite of it. The law of love and the requirements of justice and mercy and humility sound everywhere in the songs of your God found here. And it is these songs which have through all the ages sent servants like you and me into divine disobedience, against laws and fears fashioned by human hands. What command has our Lord Jesus

given us clearer than this, that we live by love and disobey what laws we must when they break his new commandment, that we love one another even as he has loved us?

In the season of Lent twenty years ago in a small church in the upper Hudson Valley, I offered a sermon whose themes I had been working through for years. Yet I could not take years to unfold the thoughts; why, not even thirty minutes. It was a moment at the Jordan for me. A fellow clergyman had sworn to land me in trouble for acting on this divine disobedience. Toward the end of the sermon, I said, "I want it to become publicly known that, as a minister in the church of Christ, I will joyfully celebrate ceremonies to bless the unions of committed gay men and women. I will go to homes if necessary, but if the session of this church should approve, I will do it right here. What earthly or heavenly good can be served by closing the doors of blessing for another day on our brothers and sisters who seek to love one another in faith and in hope, asking the communion of 'God and these witnesses' to help them on their way?"

Now, the sermon had its claims and its persuasions, but ideas are nothing without action. It was the words intending action, and all that followed, which set that church on fire for years to come. That was how I began to learn what *spiritual* community is—at the constant edge of a decision, crucial, though not alone, passing over through the waters of liberation and awareness in divine disobedience.

Never has our culture more needed the voice and action of you who are Christian and who are wide in spirit and compassionate of heart to affirm that this is the way you have come, the way of Elijah, the way of Elisha, the way of Christ, over Jordan, standing upon the constant edge of decision for the truth in love; standing for lives of pride, hope, self-possession, and liberty, ready again to ask a whole people to pass through the waters. For there is no one who was never meant to survive.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*First Presbyterian Church
Brooklyn, New York*

© 2010 Stephen H. Phelps