"Walk the Walk, Talk the Talk"

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; II Kings 2:1-18 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 1, 2026
All Saints Memorial Sunday

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might renew our commitment to living out your hopes for our world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

There is a theory of dream interpretation that suggests every character in our dreams is some aspect of ourselves. That may or may not make sense to you, depending on your dreams, but I have often found it to be a fruitful approach to scripture, especially when we're engaging with a story as meaty as the one we just read. If we apply this idea to the story of Elijah's ascension into heaven, we can uncover quite a few lessons about dying and grief. The first and perhaps most ironic being that one of the main points of this story is that Elijah didn't die exactly, but rather, was swept up into heaven. The lesson being that loss is loss, regardless of the technicalities. That's important to remember.

As the chapter begins, it is made clear that Elijah knows what's happening. By the time Elisha interacts with the first company of prophets, it becomes clear that everyone knows what's happening. It is not explained how anyone knows, including Elijah, but given his prophetic nature, it does not come as a surprise. This framing can help us see how the loss of Elijah is like some of the losses in our own lives – the ones that involve long declines, months or weeks in hospice care, the not unexpected

deaths. And yet, some of the lessons this story offers can apply to the losses that do take us by surprise.

Let's imagine first that we are Elijah. We might be tempted, because he is one of the preeminent Old Testament prophets, to put Elijah on a pedestal and assume that when he's telling Elisha he doesn't have to come along on the journey, that he's testing Elisha's faithfulness. But if we put ourselves in Elijah's shoes – that is, if we truly allow him to be human – what might feel more familiar is the possibility that Elijah doesn't want to be a burden. I truly believe this is one of the most important lessons that old age and dying can teach us, if we're willing to learn. Why is it that we're so insistent on not being a burden? Why are we so afraid of bothering people with our legitimate, human needs? We all have them. That's how we're made. And yet, there are those who insist they would rather drive off a cliff than require 24-hour care. "You don't have to come," Elijah says. "It's a pretty far walk. It's probably easier if you just stay here with the company of prophets. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Is Elijah testing him? Is he giving Elisha an out? Is he hinting that he'd honestly rather be alone? Does he think maybe he'd rather be alone because he doesn't want to be a burden? What if it's all of that, all at the same time? We are complicated, we humans, not least when the end is approaching. And now it's Elisha's turn. Because we've been there too, haven't we?

Three times he says it: "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." You're not a burden. I will not abandon you. God has placed me beside you, and I will remain here until you are taken from me. The fact that they are walking through the desert does not mean this situation doesn't also apply to those who sit at bedsides day after day, night after night. "I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey thro'," as the hymn puts it. There are those of you in this very room who have just recently finished walking that journey with loved ones. You know this determination, this devotion. You have walked this walk. You know that it is exhausting in the most holy way. It is difficult but it's rarely a journey anyone regrets making.

There are other lessons we can learn from Elisha. Those awkward moments with each company of prophets who try to butt into this very personal situation – "Yes, I know; keep silent." How freeing would it be to simply tell the people who try to insert themselves into your grieving process to go away and leave you alone? Would a grief counselor try to convince Elisha he should open up? Maybe at some point, but that time had not yet come. Elijah was still with him, and he needed to focus on that.

That shining moment when Elijah asked Elisha what he wanted from him before he left – "a double share of your spirit." In the customs of the day, this was Elisha claiming the inheritance of the firstborn son, the double portion. Elijah didn't

exactly seem to think that was his to bestow, but he gave Elisha a chance at it, knowing that God would come through as God saw fit. And God did, which leads us to that next crucial moment, when Elisha dares to test the legacy. When he picks up that cloak by the riverside, could he tell if it would work for him like it had for Elijah? Had the Spirit shifted to his shoulders? Have you experienced that moment? When you became the patriarch or the matriarch, and you realized you are now the one whom others will be looking to for leadership and wisdom? That mantle is heavy, but the weight can also be a comfort.

Here we must pause for a moment and recognize again that this story only reflects some of the experiences we have with loss. Sometimes that grace Elijah offered, in naming that there was a legacy to be handed on, never materializes, either because our loved ones can't bring themselves to accept that they're dying or because they haven't ever been given the language to express it or whatever other human reason. Sometimes we don't receive the legacies we desire, and sometimes we can't or don't want to pick up that mantle and carry on in the place of the one who's gone. Some legacies are not worthy of being carried on, even if they are revered by others who aren't asked to carry their weight. The human details of this story do not negate the human details of stories that follow a different narrative.

Indeed, the more we look at the characters in this story, the more we can see how it reflects truth about the awkwardness and mis-steps that often accompany our

grieving processes. We are not just Elijah or Elisha; we are also those companies of prophets, butting in where we're not necessarily wanted and then, by the end of the story, trying to make things better with false hopes and extreme measures that deny reality. These are totally human reactions, but they are not particularly helpful. We know that, but sometimes we just can't help ourselves. We want to fix death, not accept it, despite the fact that that is never how it works.

The more faithful response is the one illustrated by the invisible character, the last one whose shoes we need to contemplate occupying for a moment: the narrator. In the days and weeks and months after a loss, when that walk has been walked and the journey has come to an end, that is when we need to talk the talk; we need to tell the stories. We need to follow this narrator's example, in respecting who the main characters are: this is a story about Elisha losing his beloved teacher Elijah. Yes, there are hangers-on; there is a peanut gallery. But this writer keeps them in their appropriate place: letting them remind us how not all the things we want to do to help are helpful, but not letting them take over the story.

And so, of all the lessons offered in this story about grief, there are two that stand out: walking the walk and talking the talk. When we are called upon to be the one who accompanies the one taking their leave, the important thing is that we don't look away. "I will not leave you" is one of the deepest promises of love we can ever offer. Living it out is one of the truest acts of faithfulness. Sometimes that journey is

full of life and ends unexpectedly. Sometimes that journey involves months of lingering while sensible conversation wanes into mostly silence, until finally heaven's chariot arrives. Breaks are allowed, of course, and sometimes they serve as the moment required for the loved one to let go. We cannot second-guess ourselves when we have walked that walk as best we can. Whether the journey is long or short, it's those who came alongside who receive its blessings.

And once that walk has been walked, then the talking picks up where the journey left off. We tell those stories, because that is how we notice and remember what really matters. That is when we see the patterns that shaped our loved one's life. Telling stories is how others can reflect back to us the faithfulness they saw us living out as we walked. Telling stories is how we give thanks. Telling stories is how we express loss. Repeating ourselves over and over is how we shape the legacy we will carry forward. "As the LORD lives and as you yourself lives, I will not leave you." If you tilt you head the right way, it's almost as if it's the Spirit whispering this promise to us. Hallelujah and Amen.