

27 June, 2010; Proper 8c
2 Kings 2: 1-14; Ps 77: 1-2, 11-20
Gal 5: 1, 13-15; Luke 9: 51-62

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When I was a young girl, my father took me to Egypt. We crawled through the claustrophobic passages inside the Great Pyramid at Giza, gazed in awe at the frescoes inside the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, then went to Saqqara, the city of the dead. On it stretched, acre after acre for almost ten square miles: the necropolis of ancient Egypt. Pyramid after pyramid, but, even more breathtaking, a whole city of houses for the dead, each one decorated with everything the dead soul would need: food, plates, cooking pots, jewelry, musical instruments, images of horses and cows -- a world complete for the shades to wander.¹ Walking through room after room, I realized that everything we had seen in Egypt was for the dead: the pyramids and tombs of the kings, the monuments to give their names eternal life, temples where people appeased the gods, jackal-headed Anubis leering from the walls at the souls he would one day take in his boat of gold, while Isis roamed the land, looking for the pieces of her dead lover's body. It was a whole country in which the dead consumed the living, whose resources had been expended, not on this life, but on the next; with them as neighbors, it was no wonder Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their dead." (Luke 9:60)

It is a disquieting saying, perhaps one of Jesus' least sympathetic. After all, we live in a country where homes still flaunt yellow ribbons and flags for soldiers who went MIA thirty-five years ago, and the events which inspired the hit film *Black Hawk Down* demonstrate how far we will go to recover our dead. Whatever we are as a nation, we are not cavalier about our dead.

And yet, we are not at ease with them, either. The average cost of a funeral in the United States ranges from \$9-15,000 dollars-- an enormous portion of the average annual income. Perhaps the funeral directors are able to convince families to spend so much because we are secretly ashamed of how poorly we handle the process of dying. Modern medicine, which has set so many of us free to live healthy, happy lives to a great old age, has also condemned others to suffer terrible illnesses for years. Keeping them at home would deny them the care they need to relieve their pain and slow their illness, but putting them into a nursing home is, well, putting them into a nursing home. Few of us feel good about that decision. At the end, we often spend ungodly amounts of money to buy a few additional weeks of life for people who are suffering greatly. We Christians claim to believe that death is the doorway to eternal life, but we do not seem certain how to approach it.

I suspect that Elisha was not, either. When he awoke and realized that his master was going to die, Elisha and Elijah were traveling. And Elijah, wishing to spare his young friend pain, urges him to stay behind, but Elisha would not. Three times Elijah begs him to stay, and three times Elisha insists that they journey on together: "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." (2 Kings 2:2, 4, 6) At each town, prophets come to meet him and tell him that his master is going to die, and at each one, he replies, "Yes, I know; keep silent." (2 Kings 2:3, 5) It is as beautifully constructed as a Greek tragedy: the steady movement toward death, the whispered premonitions, the majestic restraint of Elisha's grief: "Keep silent." All he knew was that he wanted as much time with his mentor as possible, and if that meant that he had to walk on through the pain, so be it. There would be time enough for grief when Elijah was gone, but the present was for the living.

And so they come to Jordan, accompanied by fifty others, until Elijah strikes the water with his cloak and the two prophets go through. They have reached the point at which strangers are no comfort, where they must seize the little time that is left to speak of things that matter. And so Elijah turns to Elisha and asks, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." And

¹ The ancient Egyptians envisioned an afterlife very much like life on this earth. We, as Christians, do not.

Elisha makes a response which is perfect in its cheeky effrontery: "Please let me inherit a double portion of your spirit." (2 Kings 2:9-10) A double portion of the spirit of Elijah?!! This is, after all, the greatest prophet to come before Jesus, a man who chastened kings, caused years of drought, struck men dead with fire from heaven, and raised the dead to life. And Elisha asked to be greater than that? Perhaps. Or, perhaps, what he was asking took no great gall at all: Master, let me be just like you.

In the days after my stepfather's death, I found myself visiting the places that he loved. I would go to restaurants and eat his favorite dishes, turn on the television and watch his favorite shows. It was as if I were nourishing the seeds of Dick which were left in me, feeding them and coaxing them to bloom, as if, by enjoying the things we shared, I could also share in his spirit: his integrity, his brilliance, his zany humor, his slant-eyed, perceptive way of looking at the world. I found myself responding to his death by trying to graft his life into mine, to become a stronger person by consciously absorbing what he had taught me.

And so Elijah and Elisha walked and talked by the Jordan, until a flaming, fiery chariot caught Elijah up to heaven, while Elisha cried out in grief and awe, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" (2 Kings 2: 12). "But when he could no longer see him," he did not linger, but stooped down, picked up Elijah's mantle, and struck it across the water, calling down God. Then he crossed the Jordan into the land of the living and went on with his work. And when the other prophets begged him to send them to try to find Elijah, he said only, "Do not go." (2 Kings 2:19) In other words, "Let the dead bury their dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God."

The striking thing about both passages is how relentlessly both Jesus and Elisha focus on the living. Elisha does not waste time trembling about the loss to come, but, rather, enjoys Elijah's company while he can. Jesus does not invite the young man into an extended period of mourning, even for his father, but urges him to engage with his life and the task at hand. The Gerasene demoniac may have lived among the tombs, maddened by grief and lost among the dead, but the followers of Christ live among the living, for the present moment is the only one in which we can receive the gifts of God.

"For freedom Christ has set you free," proclaims St. Paul, "do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal 5:1) And again, "if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." (Rom 5:10) Did you see what Paul did? Even in the plan of salvation, the death of Christ is the gateway, but it is *life*, his life in us, which is the path of salvation.

Bruce Coggin tells a story about the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Soon after the revolution, the government launched a campaign to eradicate religion from the masses. For several years, they sent emissaries to lead re-education sessions in towns and villages all over the country. In one of them, the propagandists summoned the whole town together, demonstrated to them that religion was a lot of useless and false superstition, and then promised that the Socialist state would now accomplish for the people all the promises on which the church had failed to deliver. The speeches went on for hours. At the end, when the party officials had finally fallen silent, the village priest stepped forward, looked in their faces, and cried out, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" And behind him, all the people of the town replied, "The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!"²

That is our response to death, to dying, to loss, and to farewell: not to refuse to grieve, but, even amid our grief, to look for the flaming chariots of God and to hold on to the twin reality of resurrection. When you are faced with caring for the sick and the elderly, ask yourself, "What would resurrection look like for them, at this time, in this reality?" Would it look like relief from pain that only a nurse could give? Would it look like time with loved ones, like one more trip to a favorite

² Sermon preached on Easter, 2010, cited by Katie Sherrod in her blog, Desert's Child.

place, even if that takes a toll on their health? Would it look like a book group to keep the mind alive, or artistic creativity to feed the heart? What would resurrection look like in parting from a friend, in treasuring the memory of one dead? What would resurrection look like when you're not mourning, when you are simply trying to live each day the best you can? What would give life, not just to the body, but to the human being?

If we take the example of Christ seriously, sometimes it looks like sacrifice. Jesus could have had home and comfort; instead, he had no place to lay his head. He could have enjoyed the satisfaction of hurling his rage on his enemies like fire; instead, he chose restraint. He could have used his power to obtain status and feasts and fine robes; instead, he chose the crown of thorns and the mockery of the soldiers and the offering of his body and blood. Those were the things which were, ultimately, life-giving: not in this world, but to eternal life.

Malidoma Som^o, a medicine man from Burkina Fasso, speaks of this imperative out of his own indigenous tradition: "If we can see ourselves as nourishment to the beauty that we see, then the beauty that we see can also be nourishment to us...If you cannot offer yourself as a meal to ...whatever it is that you love, then it is impossible to be fully present in the world and to understand the cycle of birth and death... It is not healing or constructive to see ourselves as just the recipient of beauty. We must also be a gift to that beauty."³

He is speaking of sacrifice and of purpose: of having a thing or person in our lives for which we are willing to offer ourselves, as Christ offered himself for love of us. We can tend the bodies of the sick for a long time, but unless their soul feels its purpose, we are tending a withering shell. If we seek always to avoid death, we will live in the city of death. But if we accept it, for freedom we are set free. For Jesus said, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matt 16:25) As Martin Luther King wrote, "A man who hasn't discovered something he is willing to die for is not fit to live."

That is the paradox of resurrection: that in knowing our end, we know our path. Elisha wanted to have time with his master, and so he followed all the way to Jordan. But Elijah -- Elijah was not looking toward this world. He set his star by the burning chariot, and took the path which led there.

In a few minutes, we will celebrate Communion. We will recite the words of Christ: "This is my body, given for you. This is my blood shed for you." Those are not his words only, but ours, not his path only, but ours. Set them as the star on your horizon and follow where they lead. All else is a city of the dead, but *that* is chariot of fire with horses of fire.

Amen.

³ Quoted in "Between Two World: Malidoma Som^o on Rites of Passage," an interview conducted by Leslee Goodman, *The Sun*, July, 2010, p.8.