

“Rise Up!”  
Sermon by Rev. David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
February 11, 2018  
Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9

It is a wonderful image. A young adult - new in their profession. Meeting with their mentor. The one who has been so generous with their time and wisdom. They have had monthly coffee appointments to talk through difficulties, keep focused on what is most important, sharing in the struggles and offering a north star of purpose. Have you been so lucky as to have an older adult in your life who can be a sounding board, an anchor, a lifeline? Someone who cares enough to really listen, and to help you see through the current opportunities and challenges toward your big picture career, your personal fulfillment, to use a theological term, to live into your calling?

Today we have two prophets, with similar sounding names. Elisha - the young prophet. And Elijah, the older, battle-scarred prophet. We've talked about how difficult the job of being a prophet was. Speaking truth to power. Performing bold symbolic acts that were to communicate through the thick skulls of a people who did not always want to hear. Did Elisha feel like the profession was getting harder? Did he worry if he was up to it? Was he looking forward to his mentor retiring - or was he afraid?

A good friend of mine recently retired as the pastor at a nearby church. We had worked together nationally on the full inclusion of GLBT Presbyterians for a long time before we both moved to the Twin Cities. More than fifteen years of working together on issues big and small. And he just retired. My colleague from Delaware - who taught me a lot about preaching from listening to him twice each Sunday - is retiring in April. And it is a bit of a lonely feeling. To suddenly have those friendships shift. To be a bit more alone in a profession.

Elisha and Elijah. For about ten years, they had been a team. Elijah, the prophet, and Elisha, the young assistant. And now it is time for Elijah to go. Elijah keeps trying to get Elisha to stay back. “Stay here,” the older prophet keeps saying, “I must go ahead.” But the younger prophet refuses to leave his side. Three times he responds, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you” (2 Kings 2:2, 2:4 and 2:6). The younger prophet refuses to leave. So, finally, Elijah says, “tell me what I may do for you before I am taken [away] from you?”

“Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit,” the young prophet asks (2 Kings 2:9). A double portion. He seems utterly loyal - and knows how difficult the task will be. Put yourself in the young prophet’s sandals. Have you ever asked that same request of someone you admired and trusted? To inherit a double portion of their spirit? “Tell me those stories again, grandma. I need to really, really know them.” Or, “I need all the wisdom you can pass on,” you ask someone you love when they are about to take leave and you know that you will remain. It

is one of those profound requests within the Bible, and within our experience. Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.

And then, as they are talking we get a description of fantastic imagery: a "chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). With young Elisha watching and crying out. It is the most memorable exit in all of the Hebrew Scriptures. Elijah rising up out of sight. And to this day, Jews leave a place for Elijah at the Seder meals.

Fast forward. To Jesus, at the peak [pun intended, I guess] of his powers. With three of his disciples, his followers, his assistants, his students with him. And they go up a mountain. We can assume that they were going up to pray. Like a passage last week in which Jesus took a break, getting up early to escape for some silence and prayer, and then to return to the requests of a clamoring crowd (Mark 1:29-39), we can assume this is part of Jesus' spiritual practices. To get away from the work for a bit. Seeking solitude and sabbath. The perspective that a hike up a mountain can provide.

Was it a day hike, or were they at the beginning of a longer backpacking trip? We don't hear what they were intending to do, because they are interrupted with this scene that is shrouded in mystery and mysticism. With brilliant light and a cloud that will overshadow them. They are up there on the mountain with Jesus.

And suddenly Jesus "was transfigured before them," the gospel says. His clothes became dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9, verse 3). We cannot let the marketing team at Tide hear about this story or they will coopt it just like Ram trucks did with the Martin Luther King speech in their Super Bowl ad.

It is as if the gospel writers are struggling to find the words to give us even a sense of what it was like for Peter, James and John who were also up there on the mountain. "There appeared to them Elijah and Moses who were talking with Jesus." Incredible - their friend and teacher, Jesus, clearly someone special to them, takes them up a mountain and now the two superheroes of the Jewish faith - Moses and Elijah are with Jesus talking. And wouldn't we give most anything to hear what they were saying?

How did you do it - how did you part the Red Sea? Where did you find the courage to go up to Pharaoh? How did you do that disappearing act up into the clouds, Elijah? Did you ever wonder if God might abandon you? Were they giving Jesus advice and wisdom? Reassuring him that he could handle the task God was giving him? Wouldn't it be amazing to overhear their conversation?

The Gospel doesn't let us in on what the three were saying. But then we do hear words that boom from the cloud, "This is my Son, the beloved; Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). And then they were alone again.

I can imagine being in the sandals of Peter. Amazed. Scared. Wondering if I was hallucinating. Amazed that I was having this experience. Wondering if James and John were

seeing the same things I was seeing, hearing the same things I was hearing. Does this kind of thing happen all the time with Jesus? Am I just now finally seeing it?

Do you try to sound sophisticated? Or shocked. My colleague Jon, the pastor who is about to retire from First Presbyterian Church in NYC, told me the advice he was given as a kid who had grown up in St. Joseph Missouri before his first trip to New York City. "Jon, you are going to be amazed at how tall those buildings are. Don't stare up to the tops of the skyscrapers with your mouth open." If I am Peter, do I try to play it cool? Is that even possible? Do I get to speak to Moses and Elijah? What on earth do you say if you are Peter?

I'm thinking all these things are running through Peter's head, but what he blurts out is, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." If they were on a longer backpacking trip that would make sense, right? They have the tents right there - it's a generous offer to give up their tents to Moses and Elijah.

But it also comes off as a bit foolish thing to say. We cannot freeze time - we cannot control the holy. Stop time and give Moses your sleeping bag so that this mystical moment can be maintained? That is not how it works. The Transfiguration story has a strange paradox. The celebration of this brief shining moment with the ending where the disciples want to freeze time and Jesus says time to get back to work.

The point is - Jesus is seeming to make with the three disciples who have just been wowed and bedazzled - the point is not about rising up above everyone else. The point is to go back down and help others rise up to their full identity. To help others claim the power and love of God. To help others overcome the challenges that keep pulling them down.

For Elisha, he would have to continue the work with Elijah gone. He would have to call on that double portion of an inheritance. For the disciples, they would stagger and retreat with the execution of Jesus. But slowly they would find their footing, and carry on his ministry, taking the ministry of Jesus and placing it in the hands of the church that would - however imperfectly - continue in Jesus' ways.

And so this story becomes a reminder about what exactly is the mission of the church. That yes, finding time for sabbath, and beauty is important. And a reminder that those mountaintop moments can sometimes provide dazzling truth and allow us to claim our identity. So yes- schedule a hiking trip. Yes, find time for a spiritual retreat. But know also that there will come a time to go back down the mountain. To get back to work. To be about the work of Jesus in our world today.

It is VocalPoint weekend here at Central. One of the great events in the life of this congregation. A totally unique blend of excellent music and transformative mission. The goal is to inspire, to raise awareness about important work being done in our community, and raise funds to support that work.

This year's beneficiary organization is Twin Cities R!SE. And this organization lives out the belief that we have to help others rise up. That helping people discover skills and practices

that will lead to better paying, long-term, stable jobs. The work of Twin Cities R!SE matters not just for the people they serve, but for the whole community, because we are so much stronger together when we can turn hopelessness into genuine hopefulness. When people can overcome addictions through caring no-nonsense counselors and support groups. That people need to hear others say you are loved and valued and you can do great things. And when that encouragement begins to soak in and lives begin to change. We need that work happening in our community. That is the kind of work that Jesus modeled for those disciples, and that is the kind of work that those disciples put into practice in the early church.

We don't rise up alone. We do so standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, teaching us the way, loving us for who we are. We rise up through the grace of God. And we can continue the work of Jesus in our world – helping others to know that they are loved fully and deeply, that there is a holy purpose for our lives that together, with God's help, we can rise up.

May it be so. Amen