

At the River, Wondering “Where is the Lord?”

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, 30 June 2019

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-62

I get a lot of my news on the radio, so I do not always see photos or images. But when I go to the gym, I usually watch TV. And as it happens, I was at the gym Tuesday morning when the photos were released.

Oscar Alberto Martinez and his daughter Valeria who died while trying to cross the Rio Grande. It is too heartbreaking to describe, so I won't, but I'm sure many of you saw it. Like the image of Aylan Kurdi, a three year-old migrant boy whose body was found on a beach in Turkey, this image has put a world tragedy into sharper focus.

They were not fleeing gang activity or violence, so they likely would not have qualified for asylum. They were economic migrants. According to Oscar's mother, the family was hoping to work for a few years, save some money, and return to El Salvador to build their own house. She begged them not to go, or to leave their daughter home with her rather than take the risk. But they did not listen, and the story ended in tragedy at a river.

Like many stories in the Bible, the story of Elijah and Elisha also involves a river. The two prophets each took a mantle and parted the waters of the Jordan. And as we read this lesson today, I find myself asking Elisha's question: Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

The Jordan is a holy place. It was so full of religious significance John the Baptist went there to offer his baptism for repentance. Jesus met John at the Jordan and asked to be baptized by him.

The Jordan is a little touristy today, but it was formidable in the past, especially during flood season. On their journey to the promised land, the people of Israel came full stop when they got to its banks. The Lord had to explain how to cross. The priests carrying the Ark of Covenant walked into the water first. As soon as the soles of their feet got wet, the waters flowing from above were cut off and the riverbed became dry. The priests stood in the middle on dry land, bearing the ark, holding the waters back. All the people of Israel walked around them as quickly as they could.

When the last person was across, the Lord told Joshua to take twelve large stones from the middle of the Jordan where the priests' feet stood on dry ground. Then the priests carried the ark to the shore and the waters returned. The people camped that night in Gilgal. The next day, Joshua had the stones set up there as a memorial.

As the stones were put in place, Joshua said this to the Israelites, ‘When your children ask their parents in time to come, “What do these stones mean?” then you shall let your children know, “Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground” (Joshua 3 & 4).

The people had first crossed the Red Sea to escape Pharaoh and begin their journey to freedom. Now they crossed the Jordan to end their wilderness wanderings and settle in a new land as God’s people. Their entire journey with God involved crossing a river.

And now Elijah and Elisha were at the same river. Along the way, the Lord led them past several holy places. They started at Gilgal and surely saw the twelve stones and remembered that the Lord had made a way for them. From there, they journeyed to Bethel. Long ago, Jacob had fled to this spot when his brother Esau threatened to kill him. Jacob dreamed of a ladder of angels and realized the Lord was with him. He named the place House of God, or Beth-el, and the name stuck. After leaving Bethel, Elijah and Elisha passed through Jericho, where the walls had tumbled down and the Lord had led the people in victory. And then they came to the Jordan River, where Joshua had parted the waters just like Moses at the Red Sea.

And when they crossed, Elijah finally asked what Elisha wanted.

Please let me inherit a double portion of your spirit. Elisha was not asking to be twice as powerful as Elijah. According to Deuteronomy, when a man died, the first born received a double portion of the man’s possessions. The details were not spelled out, so we don’t know exactly what that meant, but this is the language Elisha used. He was not asking to be twice the prophet Elijah was. He simply asked to be like his spiritual first born. He asked for strength to carry on the work to the best of his ability. *Please let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.*

“You have asked a hard thing,” Elijah responded. “Yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.”

It sounds like magic hocus-pocus, but it was not. This was good advice from one who had walked the path before. If Elisha just kept at it, if followed in Elijah’s footsteps and did not give up, he would do all that Elijah did and more.

So, they kept walking and talking. Elisha watched as Elijah was taken away in a whirlwind. He grieved and wept and tore his clothes. And then came time for the test.

Elisha was nervous when he got to the Jordan. He was not sure this was going to work. How would he get across on his own? “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” So, he did what he had seen Elijah do. He took the mantle and struck the water. And just as they had for Joshua and Elijah, the waters parted to the one side and to the other. Elisha walked through on dry land and went on to serve the Lord through the reigns of the next four kings of Israel.

Friends, we have been baptized with Jesus in the waters of the Jordan, the waters that Joshua and Elijah and Elisha parted. Their story is our story. How can we take up their mantle and part the waters in our day so that all can be free?

First, like Elisha, don't turn back. Several times Elijah said clearly, "Stay here." But Elisha kept following, like a puppy refusing to go home.

Jesus said the Reign of God demands the same loyalty. The things that made people turn back are telling. The first person didn't even put up an excuse but still Jesus warned him, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." No one had said anything about accommodations, but Jesus knew the desire for comfort can make us turn aside from the path. So, prepare to be uncomfortable. And going back to bury a father or say goodbye to friends were noble and gracious things to do. But loyalty to the Reign of God has to be higher than family or friends, so do not give up and do not turn back. Even when the news gets worse and worse. Even when your friends think you're mixed up. Even when you grow weary. Keep your hand on the gospel plow.

Second, walk with the ancestors.

We admire them so much, the heroes of faith who went before us. William Wilberforce and Anna Alexander and Jonathan Daniels and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Frances Perkins. If you don't know their stories, look them up. They are all in the Episcopal Church's calendar of holy people. We remember them in our services on Wednesday nights. They ended the slave trade, established schools, fought for voting rights, resisted fascism, and advocated for fair labor. There are thousands more like them, some famous and some known only to a few. We pray to inherit a double portion of their spirit, to continue their work in our time until the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

And this is why learning the scriptures and the history of our faith is so important. This is why we make our children and youth go to Sunday School and encourage adults to keep learning all our lives. It is our version of walking past Gilgal and Bethel. Scripture and tradition remind us. They help us see that the challenges of the present time are not new territory. The people of God have always had to figure out how to protect the vulnerable and welcome the stranger and care for the earth and choose righteousness and love our enemies. If they did it, we can, too.

So we persist. And we remember. And then we are able to follow their example.

Seeing that horrific image of Oscar and Valeria, we ask, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?"

The Lord is in us. Like the prophets and saints before us, we have received power to part the waters. I do not mean the literal waters of the Rio Grande. This is not a call for open borders. But it is a call for compassion. Our job as God's people is to make life easier for others in whatever way we can. That is not a partisan or political idea. It is a baptismal idea. We remind ourselves every time we come to these waters. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? I will, with God's help.

You are doing this in so many ways. You are making life easier for clients at Wynnton and for children at Brewer Elementary and Boxwood Recreation Center and for students at Msalato Theological College in Tanzania and for children who made new friends at TAP this week. You are making life easier for neighbors and people you meet at work and those for whom you pray. And I am so proud of you. But there is more to do. We were reminded of that this week.

So do not grow weary. Pray for a double portion of the Spirit. Pray to walk faithfully with our ancestors. Pray to be people who part the waters that all may stand on dry ground. Amen.

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Grace Burton-Edwards
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Columbus, GA 31906
StThomasColumbus.org