

I feel Elisha’s pain: The agony that eats away at you when you wait for bad news to arrive. The sick knot in your stomach as you contemplate your mentor and close friend leaving you behind, while he heads off on some other God-directed adventure. Oh, Elisha, I’ve been there. Recently. It’s not pretty.

Really, though, haven’t we all been there ... facing a separation from someone we care about? Life, it seems, is full of one parting after another. Sometimes those partings are temporary and bittersweet, like putting your child on the bus to kindergarten or taking them to college. Sometimes they’re fraught with concern, like sending a loved one to military service. Sometimes they’re uncertain, like leaving the security and identity of the working world for retirement. Sometimes, they just hurt, like standing at the graveside of someone who has died before you were ready to let them go. Yes, we’ve all been there. Times like these test our faith and weigh heavy on our souls. Some of us adjust to change easier than others, but I’m not sure it’s ever actually easy.

Our Old Testament scripture for today offers a snapshot of separation. We know it best because of the fantastic image of whirling pillars of fire and Elijah’s amazing ascent into heaven, the reward for his faithful service to God. But it’s also a time of transition for Elijah’s apprentice, Elisha. They both knew this day would come. It’s why Elisha was called: to replace Elijah as God’s prophet. But that doesn’t mean Elisha had to like it. In fact, we see in the text that he tried to postpone the moment as long as possible. “Stay here,” Elijah tells him – once, twice, three times. *No*, Elisha replies. *I will not leave you*. He’s holding on. Who can blame him? And his response to the helpful prophets warning him of what’s to come? Little more than a politely veiled *shut up*.

Some Bible commentators say this is really a hopeful passage. It reassures Israel that in their time of transition they can see clues that God is still with them. They point to parallels with Moses and Joshua. The beloved spiritual leader is leaving, but God is raising up a new one to take his place. The journey from Gilgal to the Jordan echoes the route the Israelites followed when they finally entered the promised land. This whole story is about promise, God's promise to be with God's people.

But when I read this text, I don't always hear that word of promise. I get stuck with the feelings. I think of Elisha's sorrow, his anxiety about life without his mentor and friend. I imagine times when I've faced change and loss, and the emotions that came with them. The reality is, grief is a process. It's messy. It's not a nice, neat, linear step-by-step plan that can be mastered or managed. Part of the process is that we hang on for dear life. We want to stay with what's familiar, what's comfortable. And part of that process is learning how to let go. We have to figure out how to make our way in a new normal. And it is in the process that we begin to live into the change. That might mean you adjust to a new routine, a different way of doing things. You try things on for size. You talk about your feelings, your experiences. You listen to others share theirs. This isn't easy. It can be scary, or awkward, or sad. But here's the thing: it's not something you do alone. These things are often best done in community – with a support group, good friends, God.

Maybe that's what those Bible commentators mean about this passage being hopeful. Because the underlying message is one that sustains and comforts us at all times, but especially when we face times of change. And that message is this: God is at work, bringing forth something new.

I can picture Elisha standing there, looking up into heaven, hoping against hope that maybe that chariot would reappear. But eventually, his gaze has to return to earth. And when it does, he spots something lying on the ground. It's Elijah's cloak. He picks it up. It feels heavy in his hands. Slowly, he rolls it, just as he saw Elijah do, and strikes the river. The waters roll back. And there's his sign: he is the new prophet. Elijah isn't coming back. Through the grace of God Elisha has his own call to go forward and he knows that God will be with him as he does.

Friends, we find ourselves in times of transition all the time. Sometimes they're relatively minor. Sometimes they're completely life-altering. Regardless, eventually we have to move from the past into a new normal. To do that, we need to hear God's call to go forward ourselves. Because whether the changes we face come from life stage or our own choices or things beyond our control, they will happen. And they might even shake us to the core. But the road we're on is just that, a road. It's taking us someplace. God is taking us someplace. Isn't that what we claim through scripture: that whether we are standing on the mountaintop or walking through the darkest valley God is with us. And so the real question we face is not *will I get through this?* It's *will I trust God to bring forth something new in me?*

Transfiguration Sunday hints at the change Jesus is going to face. You see, he's preparing to go to Jerusalem. He doesn't know what will be waiting, but he knows that's where God has sent him. That glimpse of glory we see in the transfiguration is but a part of the story. Because we know that Jesus' journey also includes the cross. But we trust God to bring forth something new even from the cross ... indeed, because of the cross all things are made new.

Friends, I don't know what kind of separation or transition you're facing in your life right now. I don't know where you are in the process of living into that new normal. But I do know this: God is one step ahead of you. He has already been where you are going. He has been and will always be with you on the journey. Because the one thing you can cling to is the promise of God's never-ceasing presence and love. Yes, change is coming, but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.