

STAYING IN THE MOMENT

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on June 20, 2010

Crossroads United Church, Kingston

2 Kings 2: 1- 14

Luke 9:51-62

One day last winter I stopped into the palliative care room at St Mary's to visit a patient who was dying and whose life I had been asked by the family to celebrate. When I arrived her best friend was with her and her sister. The sister had covenanted with the best friend to spend some time in vigil and she was going to leave and attend to some errands. Her departure had been delayed as the two of them had begun chatting about sundry things. The conversation now included the three of us.

The sister was readying to leave when her husband arrived unexpectedly with sandwiches from the cafeteria for the two of them to share. It was snowing and he was soon going to go shovel out some driveways for which he was under contract. Since he might not be home for dinner he thought that he would take the opportunity to spend time with his wife over the lunch hour.

I had planned to go to visit in the afternoon but had stopped in on a whim as I was making my way home for lunch. Given the weather it made sense to make the hospital call earlier in the day rather than later. As we were chatting together a nurse came in with her stethoscope to check on the vital signs of the patient. Her breathing was shallow, eyes were closed and she was not responsive to touch. The nurse listened and then said in a quiet voice, "It is not going to be much longer."

While we all knew that her death would be soon, not one of us fully realized that it was immanent. The sister drew close to the bed side and took the left hand of her sister in hers and the husband put down the sandwiches that he had been holding and stood behind his wife and placed one arm around his beloved and the other on the patient's arm. The best friend took hold of the right hand and I was at the foot of the bed. It seemed almost fated that minister,

best friend and significant others be in the room at that moment. We were united physically, spiritually and emotionally. It was agonizing and liberating at the same time. We breathed as one-afraid to speak lest the trivial and the banal usurp the magnitude of the moment. The breathing became increasingly quiet and the chest stopped rising, and we all wept quietly in solidarity of loss and thanksgiving that the suffering was ended.

Circumstances had brought us together where we needed to be at the moment that we needed to be, and this awed and graced us all. We stayed connected until the moment became too pregnant with reality and demands to remain in; there were phone calls to make and a service to plan. To this day I continue to be awestruck that we found ourselves together at that critical moment, and the words of Elisha both bless and burn as I read them, “As the Lord lives and as you yourself live I will not leave you.”

The Hebrew text is one of love and loyalty that, for me, is on par with the stories of David’s love for his best friend Jonathan and Ruth’s devotion for her mother in law, Naomi. This is the story of two men together on a journey; a journey that shall culminate in death. The star of one was fading and that of Elisha was rising. And Elisha is totally cognizant of this reality, although we know not how.

Three times he is given leave by Elijah to extract himself from the moment of final parting. Three times he declines the opportunity. In the transition of power from mentor to disciple the disciple refuses to abandon his master. And though Elisha knows not the means by which he shall be separated from his master, he refuses to leave. “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” These are words of commitment and devotion- the likes of which are usually shared between lovers and partners of longstanding.

It is the implicit unspoken bond between parent and child. It is the promise made and kept between best of friends who are trying to navigate their way to an end and a subsequent new beginning of a life transformed by death. It is the stuff of great story, and the stuff of

loyalty, love and commitment and it gives me pause. One faces his death with quiet confidence and obedience, bowing to the will of God to journey from Gilgal, to Bethel, to Jericho and to the Jordan. And faithfully by his side is the disciple who shall carry on in his wake.

Elisha both refuses to abandon his mentor and friend and also refuses to assume the mantle of office any sooner than commensurate with the demise of Elijah. "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live I will not leave you." This is the loyal response of one in committed relationship who will not abandon come what may. Elisha's love for Elijah was greater than his fear of the unknown. Is it possible that one of the most godly things we can do is to stay with another, when every rational argument points us in the direction of leaving?

I am not a biblical literalist and the cadence and repetition within the narrative suggests a story that was once a part of the oral tradition, but it is the compassion of Elijah and the implicit stubbornness of Elisha that I especially love in the story. Elijah gives his young charge ample opportunity to flee from the demanding and the unknown, and Elisha continues to keep pace. They walk together, somehow knowing that what lies ahead will be frightening, but they journey on, together. Perhaps it is in these moments of shared vulnerability where the grace of God shines most. We may not be able to see it at the time. Sometimes it is in reflecting back on a demanding journey that we see the love and loyalty of friends and family, and the grace of God inherent in all things-the tragic and the triumphant. And the taking up of Elijah in the whirlwind is both tragedy and triumph for Elisha.

When Elijah is separated from Elisha and taken up into the fiery chariot Elisha cries out in lament at the loss, and then rends his clothing as a sign of deep mourning, and then he picks up the mantle of office. The power of God now rests on Elisha and the journey goes on. Elisha must retrace his steps, alone now, but vested with the power of God and a double portion of his mentor's spirit. He did not retreat from the demands of the moment. He did not hide his face from the fear of the unknown. He was willing to share the moment with his friend and

mentor rather than have him face it alone and we are graced and blest in the telling of the story, as the ministry of Elisha was blest by God for his loyalty, faith and courage.

There is no criticism levied on those who find it challenging to stay in the moment-be it a death vigil, an uncomfortable meeting with a demanding agenda, or sundry moments where one's personal integrity clashes with the reality of the moment. I have had occasions in my life when it seemed obvious to me that to stay in a moment would be to betray my principles. It is not always easy to know whether it is best to stay or to leave. The point that I am trying to make is that sometimes every fiber of our being is telling us to run-and sometimes that is the right thing to do personally, spiritually, theologically or politically. And sometimes it behooves us to say with Elisha, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."

My beloved sometimes the moment of absolute certainty is illusive. Sometimes a situation that confronts us so shocks us that we shake our heads in disbelief and want to have the offending ones punished like in the gospel. And as is further demonstrated in the gospel Jesus reminded his disciples that the demands of discipleship can leave us homeless, or can interfere with family relationships and personal agendas. Sometimes we want to say to God that the timing is just not right at the moment but God responds, "No, now." And sometimes the moment is ripe for us to allay our personal agendas and fears and even the gracious opportunity to extricate ourselves and say with Elisha, "I will neither leave you or forsake you, come what may."

I was awed and graced one winter day in my life by heeding that voice that was urging me to forgo lunch and go to the hospital. I stood with friend and family awash in the sacred mystery of life. We watched her die and then we all left at different times to go our separate ways forever linked and forever changed by the experience. And the glory of God continues to shine on through us as it did for Elisha. I am grateful for the gift of authentic moments that are both agonizing and ecstatic. Thanks be to God. Amen.