

"Having Our Faces Set"
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year C
June 27, 2010
Texts: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Luke 9:51-62
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Here's the scene before us: We have Elijah, the faithful prophet of God, the very person through whom the Lord has defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in a dramatic demonstration of power. On that mountain, Elijah had called down fire from heaven, and it came at his command, according to God's will. Elijah has been used by God in a mighty way to call the nation of Israel back into a relationship with God alone, and now this prophet is facing retirement. He has performed his duties admirably, and his game jersey will soon be on display in the prophet's hall of fame. God is calling his servant home, not in the usual way, but in a manner rather consistent with Elijah's life and ministry, in a whirlwind—the swirling, twirling, twisting of the hot desert sand. He is to go out in a blaze of glory, taken into heaven in a chariot of fire pulled by flaming stallions. What an exit scene!

But before he takes his final curtain call on the prophetic stage, Elijah sets off on a little trip with his best friend, apprentice, and prophet wannabe, Elisha. What follows in the story sure looks like a test to me, a test of Elisha's stamina and devotion [Craddock et al, p. 313]. I picture it something like this: Maybe the two companions have paused along the road at a rest stop, sitting in the shade, drinking a Coke, and snacking on some honey-roasted peanuts. "Why don't you just stay

here," says Elijah to the young Elisha. "I'm going on, but you don't have to come the rest of the way. There's no need for you to accompany me any further; I can go on by myself."

Elijah is letting Elisha off the hook, giving him the easy way out. But Elisha won't have any part of it. He is persistent and insists on going along for the whole journey [Hobbs, p. 20]. You see, he loves the old man; he is devoted to him; he can't stand the thought of not being with him; he refuses to leave his mentor's side [Cousar et al, p. 403]. In his determination, Elisha follows his friend and master all the way from Gilgal to Bethel and then on to the Jordan River.

The testing seems to continue, for when the two of them get to the Jordan River, the older prophet takes off his mantle, the cloak he is wearing, rolls it up and strikes the water before them. Just as the Lord had done for Moses and for Joshua, the Lord parts the waters and allows the two companions to cross over on dry ground together. Once on the other side of the river, Elijah quizzes Elisha as to his intentions. "What do you want of me? Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha asks for the status as the rightful heir to the prophetic leader's role. He wants his master's job, to follow in his footsteps, to continue Elijah's work for God. That is the meaning of the "double share" of the prophet's spirit that Elisha requests [Hobbs, p. 21]. Elisha wants to be God's prophet, just as Elijah has been.

It looks like a test to me, a test of Elisha's persistence, determination, commitment, and single-minded devotion. So I have to ask this question: Why is such a test important for Elijah to give and for Elisha to pass? Maybe it's because the older and wiser Elijah

understands the nature of faith and knows that *real faith in God requires persistence, determination, commitment, and single-minded devotion*. I mentioned earlier Elijah's dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Do you recall what Elijah's specific criticism of them was? He attacked them for being double-minded, for wavering and waffling from one opinion to another, for flip-flopping, for being unwilling to decide, to make a commitment, to be determined in their faith.

Can we understand Elijah's concern for determination and single-mindedness? I think we can in some areas of our lives. If you have listened to many pre-game or pre-tournament interviews with sports professionals, you probably noticed that it seldom takes long for the word "focus" to be used in those interviews. Whether the interview is with Kobe Bryant or Phil Mickelson or one of the Williams sisters, professional athletes seem convinced that having the right focus, the right concentration, the right determination and singleness of purpose are important ingredients for accomplishing their goal, which usually is, of course, to win. What is true for professional athletes is also true for musicians, for artists, for performers of any kind. Persistence and commitment are necessary for success or effectiveness.

When it comes to faith in God, though, we may not grasp fully the importance of the same kind of determination and single-minded devotion. We may not be completely convinced that our faith in God requires such commitment, persistence, and concentration. Yet the question concerning focus gets brought up over and over in the Bible. God spells out in the first of the Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before me." Joshua tells the people of Israel once they have

entered the promised land, "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, . . ." And Jesus instructs his followers, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Is our faith in God characterized by such determination and single-minded devotion? Does it need to be? What advantage to us is there in having such a focused faith? Let's continue with the story and see.

Elisha is given the choice to stay behind or to accompany his master on his journey. We often act as if we have been given the same kind of choice when it comes to faith in God. We don't have to put forth much effort if we don't want to. We can remain where we are in our journey of faith if we choose. We sure don't have to get hot and tired, with blisters on our feet from walking all the way from Gilgal to the Jordan. We can stay where it's cool and comfortable. That can be our choice. Or we can do something else entirely. We can be focused, committed, persistent in our faith. We can follow in our master's footsteps on the journey toward discovering and doing the will of God in our lives. We can, if we choose to, insist on tagging along with Elisha in his unswerving, unrelenting desire to be the kind of person of God his master was.

I think this Old Testament story informs us that God honored Elisha's determination and single-minded devotion. You see, as it turns out, these two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, are not the only characters in this narrative. Just before Elijah ascends into heaven in the whirlwind, another character enters the scene, though this character's entrance is not so obvious. Elijah suggests to his apprentice that the role of the prophet is not Elijah's to pass on. It depends on God. God alone grants

prophet status. And God winds up granting that status and role to Elisha. He passes the test. He takes up the mantle of his predecessor and is given the power by God to part the waters just as Elijah had done.

God makes it possible for us to have the kind of faith that is characterized by commitment, focus, concentration. God encourages us and enables us to have this kind of faith, *because it's in our best interest to have such focus in our lives*. And God honors this level of faith in us and rewards it with the power to do his will. That's the benefit to us: *we are empowered to live as God would have us live and to serve God and all God's children with our lives*. When we are determined in our faith toward God, single-minded in our devotion to God—God rewards us. God may not reward us materially. Materially, all Elisha had to show for his efforts was a dusty hand-me-down overcoat left lying on the ground. But with that dirty, smelly, ready to be discarded article of used clothing, the newly appointed prophet of God is given the power to part the waters by the God for whom nothing is impossible.

How do we know that God responds to our faith when it is characterized by the kind of determination and single-minded devotion demonstrated by Elisha? We know that God will respond to this kind of faith, *because God already has responded to this kind of faith*. God is single-minded in his devotion to us, determined to make it possible for us to experience authentic life. What does the passage from Luke that also was read earlier say about Jesus? It says that "his face was set toward Jerusalem." That's why he is not received very well by the Samaritans. His mind is made up as to his direction. He knows exactly where he is going, and not everyone is as interested in that destination as he is.

Jesus is determined to do God's will and single-minded in his devotion to us, so much so that he is willing to do whatever it takes to bring us back into a right relationship with God [Soards et al, p. 59]. Having his face set toward Jerusalem means that God in Christ has set his face toward us already, so that when we set our faces toward Christ, *we meet God face to face*. God is already facing us, reaching out to us, ready to receive us, inviting us to be in a relationship. Our determined faith in God and our single-minded devotion to God have already been responded to, already been honored, and already been rewarded in the compassion and pure, unbounded love of Christ. Through God's grace, we are enabled and empowered to have our faces set toward the One whose face is already set toward us.

I want you to think about something before you come to church next Sunday. It will be communion Sunday, and as is true every first Sunday of the month, we will have an illustration of what I have just described in our midst and right before our eyes, for your faces will be set next Sunday morning toward a table that will have been set for you already. Before you come into the sanctuary for worship next Sunday, the elements will be on the table. The means of grace already will be present for you to receive. The bread has been broken for you, and the cup has been poured out for you. You will not have to wait for these means of grace, and you certainly won't have to work for them. God in Christ will have been here already to serve you through them. The elements will have been prepared for you ahead of time, because of God's prior unconditional love for you and single-minded devotion to you. So all you will have to do next Sunday is set your face toward them and

come to partake of them. All you will have to do is feed on the grace of God. It will be here for you—to nourish and sustain your own walk from Gilgal to Bethel and then on to the Jordan River with your master.