

LAST SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY

Year B

This Bible study was written by Joseph Cundiff for the Last Sunday in Epiphany in 2021.

2 Kings 2:1-12

2 Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ²Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. ³The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

⁴Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here, for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. ⁵The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

⁶Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. ⁷Fifty men of the company of prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and the two of them crossed on dry ground.

⁹When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." ¹⁰He responded, "You have asked a hard thing, yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." ¹¹As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹²Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Commentary from Joseph Cundiff

Elisha and the company of prophets knew the great prophet Elijah would leave them, that God would take him away soon. Elijah himself could sense he would soon leave this earth, and he asks Elisha what he can do for Elisha. Elisha asks Elijah for a portion of his spirit, like an inheritance for a firstborn. Elisha has been with him for some time now and sees him as a father; Elisha vows not to leave Elijah's side when Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind. He knew Elijah's time was coming to an end and wanted to be with Elijah as much as possible.

After Elijah ascends, Elisha takes up Elijah's mantle (the mantle being the symbol of prophetic power), the origin of this common phrase. Elijah knows Elisha is to be his successor, yet, in his faith, he leaves that fate in the hands of God.

Elisha sees Elijah ascend into heaven; Elisha mourns and tears his clothes. Following this passage, we see the grief Elisha experiences in mourning leads him to cry out and ask where the Lord, the God of Elijah, is. God seems to respond by parting the waters as Elisha strikes them, and this exhibits the connection between Elijah and Elisha. They are so intimately connected, Elisha performs some of the same miracles Elijah did.

Discussion Questions

What mantles have you taken up? What spiritual authority have you received from your mentors?

What gifts do we leave behind for those who learn from us and look up to us?

What spiritual inheritances have you received? From whom did you receive them?

Psalm 50:1-6

- ¹ The Lord, the God of gods, has spoken; *
he has called the earth from the rising of
the sun to its setting.
- ² Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty, *
God reveals himself in glory.
- ³ Our God will come and will not keep silence; *
before him there is a consuming flame,
and round about him a raging storm.
- ⁴ He calls the heavens and the earth from above *
to witness the judgment of his people.
- ⁵ "Gather before me my loyal followers, *
those who have made a covenant with me
and sealed it with sacrifice."
- ⁶ Let the heavens declare the rightness of his
cause; *
for God himself is judge.

Commentary from Joseph Cundiff

In this opening of Psalm 50, God reveals Godself and God's glory is not strictly silent. God speaks and the earth is, the rising and the setting of the sun is. This psalm evokes creation by echoing God's calling of the earth and heavens and sun, and this psalm also evokes the Day of Judgment.

The description of God and God's acts here are different from other revelations of God seen in the Scriptures, like when God revealed Godself to Elijah. Elijah sees God's back and God is in the sound, or the voice, of sheer silence (1 Kings 19:12). The contrast is one reminder that God's revelation – and Godself – is not limited.

Discussion Questions

What glory do you experience in "silence"?

What silence is found in the forces of nature?

What images and forces come to mind when you think about God?

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing clearly the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Light will shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Commentary from Joseph Cundiff

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians contains some responses to Paul's critics who felt he was being crafty or cunning in order to withhold the Gospel or parts of it. In this passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul explains that it is not he who is hiding the Gospel, but the powers of this world. Paul explains that when one turns to Christ, the blinding veil is removed. The base assumption for Paul is that the Gospel is not veiled – the Gospel is unveiled and a light shining through darkness. Christ removes the veil that the powers of this world pull over our eyes and we see the light that God has made shine in darkness.

At the Epiphany and the season that follows, we look at the ways God has made light shine in our world with our passages about Jesus' works in the world. As we come to the end of this season, after the realization that God has made light shine into our world, how do we carry this light through changing seasons in our life (i.e., Lent)? In what ways has God made light shine in our hearts?

Discussion Questions

As messengers of the Gospel, in what ways do we carry God's unveiled light for all, even our critics, to see?

Mark 9:2-9

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Commentary from Joseph Cundiff

In this scene, Jesus is talking with Elijah and Moses. Yet, there are no recorded words of this conversation. In this moment of God’s glory revealed in the Transfiguration of Christ Jesus, as the disciples stood stunned and as Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah, there is silence.

Peter, James, and John had been with Jesus for some time now and witnessed his many works, like walking on water. Yet, at the Transfiguration, they were still shocked to see Jesus’ divinity revealed in glory. Silence may unsettle us. And, like Peter, we may start talking simply to fill the air because we are uncomfortable in silence. Still, even in confusion and fear and trembling and silence, light shines and God speaks. We may not fully comprehend why we are there at that moment, why we have the privilege to be on the mountaintop to witness a revelation, but as disciples, we may be called simply to listen.

Discussion Questions

What about silence unsettles? What prompts you to fill a void seen in silence?

Think about the times you have caught glimpses of God’s glory and your reaction.

Think about the light you have witnessed and received from God and from spiritual mentors. How you will carry that light in a world where many are blinded by a veil of the powers of this world?