

**“I Will Not Leave You”**                      **Rev. Michele Ward**  
**Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church**  
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In the face of major transitions in our lives, we each respond differently. Transitions are of all sorts. They are exciting, like starting a new career. They are sorrowful, like the death of a loved one. They are unexpected, like the onset of chronic pain or symptoms that don't go away. They are long anticipated, like the countdown to retirement or the birth of child. In last week's sermon from 1 Kings, Gretchen told us of a major transition happening in the life of Elijah. He ran into the wilderness after a major success defeating the prophets of Baal. What was not a success was the murder of these prophets, which Gretchen suggested may have led to Elijah's self pity and fear of retribution. Unwilling to face his actions or to take on the next responsibilities that God had for him, he ran away.

In this wilderness, he heard God's voice, coming to him in the silence, thin and quiet. This voice compelled Elijah to get out of the wilderness and go back out to complete the prophetic ministry God called him to finish during his life. This voice told him to find Elisha and anoint him as the prophet that would follow after him. Now, after obedience and faithfulness, Elijah will have the opportunity to rest. And not because he is running away to die like he did in his earlier ministry, but because his time had come. God will grant Elijah's desires. He will not die or suffer from illness. God will take him up into the heavens in a whirlwind, a chariot and horses made of fire carrying him away.

It does seem, though, that Elijah has a couple of loose ends to tie up before he can ride off in this holy fireworks display. He has some stops to make before his final destination at the Jordan River. Elisha, ever determined, cannot seem to get Elijah's attention. Not only is it hard for Elisha to get his teacher's attention, it appears that he is avoiding Elisha outright. First, Elijah tells him to stay in Gilgal. He wants to make this transition on his own. He thinks that this moment is between him and his God. This is not a moment for Elisha. And yet, Elisha will not leave. He refuses to stay in Gilgal. He follows him to the next town, Bethel. They have the same conversation there. Elisha refuses to stay in Bethel. He follows Elijah to the next town, Jericho. And they have the same conversation there, too. Elisha refuses to stay in Jericho. And they have the same conversation that they had in Gilgal and in Bethel. So they continue from Jericho to the Jordan River with other prophets trained underneath Elijah with them, too.

Elisha refuses to let go of Elijah, we could say. We could even say that he is trying to hold Elijah back from the holy transition from this life to the next one, refusing to acknowledge that it is time to move on. Elijah already anointed him as the prophet God chose chapters ago. What is the hang up? Why can't he seem to accept that Elijah's time to transition is here? Elisha's hang up is this: Elijah isn't finished with him yet. Elisha wants more than the title of prophet. Elisha wants more than the appointment. He wants the power. He

wants the power that God gave Elijah, and he isn't afraid to ask for more of it. I wonder if Elisha knew what tasks would be ahead for him, what kind of power he would need in order to accomplish what God had set out for him to do.

He tells the other prophets not to distract him. When they tell him that Elijah's time is near, he tells them to keep quiet. He stays focused on this goal, which is to stay with Elijah and not let him leave until he receives what he needs. The further Elijah travels, the further Elisha goes with him. He does not give up. Elijah seems a little checked out, a little burnt out, a little out of here--and Elisha will have none of it. He has one more ask for Elijah, and he will wrestle it out of him no matter how many cities, no matter how many dodges, no matter how many people tell him to let it alone. Elisha has one more ask, and he will make it.

When he finally makes it, it does not happen until Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan River together. Elijah removes his mantle, or cloak, and rolls it up like a staff. He strikes the Jordan River like Moses strikes the Red Sea, and the waters part. They pass through to the other side of the river together. And it is there--when the two are finally alone--that Elijah is fully present. Elijah and Elisha have a vulnerable conversation here. It is there, on the other side of the Jordan, that Elisha asks for a double share, or in some translations, a double portion, of his spirit. Elisha knows he's going to need it, and he asks for it.

Elijah does not tell him no. He tells Elisha like it is. He tells Elisha that he has asked for something hard. What Elisha wants will cost him. It will be difficult, this double share. Elijah says he can have it, and to have it, he must do something even braver than following Elijah around and making the request of his life. He must behold Elijah's transition. He must stand with his feet on that sacred plain on the other side of the Jordan, and take it all in while Elijah leaves this world. Elijah and Elisha have one more conversation, one that we are not privy to hearing in this account. What we do know is that they are mid-sentence when the chariot and horses separate them. They have run out of time for final goodbyes and meaningful embraces. As quickly as they come, they leave, taking Elijah with them. And now, in his grief, Elisha tears his clothes and weeps. Elijah leaves something behind for Elisha: his mantle, his cloak, the one that parted the waters of the Jordan earlier. He cries out, "Where is God?" and does what he saw Elijah do: strike the water with the cloak and then walk through the parted river.

Elisha comes away from this holy encounter blessed and equipped by God. Getting there, to the other side of the Jordan, wasn't easy. Elisha had to be persistent. He had to address the voices of his peers telling him to leave Elijah alone. He had to address Elijah multiple times before he could make his final ask. So what asks are we putting off today, right now? I venture to guess that many of us are not daring to ask like Elisha did. We are afraid of how others might perceive us. We do not want to appear needy, entitled, or downright rude. Sometimes, in order for the things we need to happen, we need to embrace the spirit of Elisha. We need to ask for that double share. And we

need to do it without embarrassment or shame. Those of us that are letting go also have to learn something. Even if we have a meaningful goodbye with someone we love, the grief is still there. The reality of the deep love we feel for one another is there. We move through, as we transition, crying out, “Where is God?” while we heal and move forward.

Transitions tend to bring out the best and the worst in us as human beings. Transitions are hard on all sides of this story of change and loss. Elijah appears to be playing games with Elisha until the very end when it counts the most that Elijah steps up and listens to what Elisha needs from him. Elisha appears to be disrespectful and ignorant, avoiding the sound advice of his peers telling him to leave Elijah alone and obey his orders. The company of prophets appear self-righteous and uninterested in doing anything except telling Elisha what to do and being observers.

The transitions we are facing in our lives right now will not go away if we avoid them. They will not disappear if we try to outrun the conversations that we need to have. They will not disappear if we stand back and become spectators in the lives that we are meant to live totally engaged. They will not disappear if we try to push someone to give us what we need before they are ready. The transitions in our city seem immenser than they were before. We are in the middle of recovering from a ransomware attack on our city systems. I have not received a water bill since April. Our city council and the new mayor of Baltimore City are attempting to restore order after the resignation of Pugh. We are at 165 homicides already this year. That is about 25 homicides a month since January 1. Highlandtown and other parts of our city with many immigrant families are emptier, according to our sister parish Sacred Heart, due to the fear stirred up by the potential ICE raids in the city. Many families have left and not told anyone where they have gone. They may never come back to Baltimore. Some members of one of the only populations growing in our city are leaving. We are in an Elisha moment; we are in a moment where we need to demand more than the mantle from the ones who have gone before us. We say to Baltimore City and to ourselves, “I will not leave you.”

We must harness this Elisha moment, friends. We cannot see these transitions as opportunities for fear to have the last say. We must say to the people ahead of us, the ones that have appointed us as their successors in this city, that we will not leave. We will not leave until we receive a double portion of their spirit. The people of Baltimore City had to be determined before this moment; we need to be even more determined today. We must cross the Jordan River and make the big ask that we are afraid to make. What is your Jordan River? Many of you know already. You know who you need to talk to today. You know what you need to change in order to shift the tide in your life and in our city. Go and ask for that double share. Cross over the Jordan. And do not walk away as you watch the power of what you asked for happen before your eyes. Do what Elisha did. Stand, in your confusion and your grief, your bravery and your vulnerability. Take in the glory of your transforming life and our transforming city. May we and the Baltimore we love never be the same. Amen.