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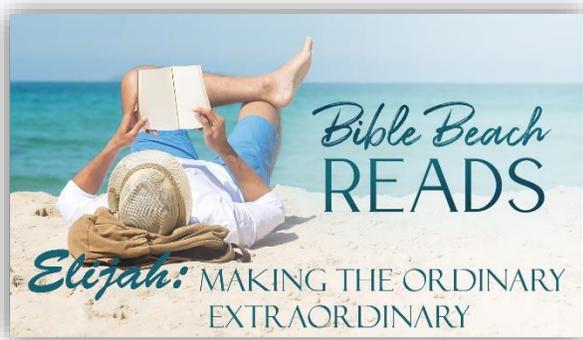
Title: Beach Reads Elijah: Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [1 Kings 19:19-21](#), [2 Kings 2:1-7](#), [James 5:17a](#)

Text: [2 Kings 2:8-15](#)

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We come to the last day of this summer's Bible beach read and the last day of our hero's life on earth. We've recognized from the outset what James teaches. "Elijah was a person just like us." (James 5:17a) This is an important description although, at the very end, it might stretch your imagination. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. To

understand the events of the last chapter of Elijah's amazing life, we have to backtrack to a barbecue in the middle of his incredible journey.

What a journey it's been! It begins as Elijah introduces himself, to us and the villain of our story, King Ahab. "I'm Elijah; you know what it means. The Lord is Jehovah. My God is it. There is no Baal. But since you don't seem to understand this, I've got a message. No rain. Not a drop."

That was the first day of his journey. It was followed by a drought of three and a half years. During that time, Elijah was fed spiritually and physically at Cherith then nurtured by miracles in Zarephath. God was doing something in Elijah so that God could do something through Elijah. It worked. Elijah stood confident and powerfully anointed before King Ahab. He was ready for the fiery showdown with the prophets of Baal. When it comes to the pyrotechnics, the prophets are duds and Elijah's the stud. But instead of bowing in victory and accepting a lifetime achievement award, Elijah runs away, scared to death of Jezebel's murderous threat.

He runs thousands of miles to hide in a cave high on the very mountain where Moses received the commandments. Yahweh calls him out of the cave as God is going to pass by. Elijah hides behind his mantle, afraid of the brilliance of the revelation. But instead of appearing in fire, wind, or earthquake, God whispers in silence, a still small voice saying "Go." "Go back to work. Go back and anoint a couple of new kings but first, find and

anoint Elisha to succeed you as my prophet." God didn't say anything about a barbecue but he got one all the same.

From the holy mountain of God, Elijah leaves and finds Elisha plowing. "There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was driving the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him" (1 Kings 19: 19). It's the very cloak that he wore when doing battle on Mt. Carmel. The very mantle that he used to hide his face when God passed by. The hair coat that was his signature piece, readily identifying him as the most powerful prophet in Israel.

"Did it have fire-scorched sleeves, perhaps? Was it stained with the blood of Baal's prophets?"¹ Maybe Elisha could smell the ozone of lighting on it or the cordite of the fireworks. Or maybe, just maybe, there was the sweet smell of God's whisper: "go." The Bible doesn't say but either by appearance, smell, or both, it communicated something to the one who received it. Instantly, Elisha knows that he has been called. This master's jacket wasn't green but it fit perfectly and he knew his life was suddenly changed. No more days looking at the southbound end of a northbound ox. Nor more oxtails and ox smells in his work life.

"He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, 'Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.' Then Elijah said to him, 'Go back again; for what have I done to you?' (1 Kings 19:20). Elijah could see the very same challenges that he faced now thrown onto Elisha. "Prophets are drunk on God, and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness, no one is ever comfortable around them. With a total lack of tact, they must roar out against phoniness and corruption wherever they find them. As such they are never asked to supper more than once. It's is a lonely life, a lonely life."² "...what have I done to you?" Elijah thought. "What am I getting him into?"

Whatever Elijah's concerns, Elisha had none. He was all in. To show it, he slaughtered his pair of oxen. Then, he took his yoke and plow, set them on fire, and threw a farewell barbecue. The entire community had oxtail, ribs, and tenderloin to celebrate his graduation from farmer to prophet protégé. He's done; he can't return. He's burned up and they've eaten his backup plan. Symbolically, whenever God did something big, people would make a sacrifice. When the prodigal son came back, the father killed the fatted calves and said, "let's party."

Elisha throws a party, sacrifices his livelihood, and leaves behind the life of following ox to follow Elijah. But he will still have to be careful where he steps.

What's interesting about Elisha is how ordinary he is. He wasn't the son of a priest, he wasn't a monk, he wasn't a spiritual giant. He wasn't rich or handsome. He was so bald kids made fun of him and so vain he took offense (2 Kings 2:19-25). He was an ordinary guy who was living at home with his parents, working on a farm. Maybe that's why Elijah saw something of himself in Elisha, saw that he was a person just like him. God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Years pass. We don't know how many and we don't know how intense the mentorship program was. We don't know if Elisha was present when Elijah confronted Ahab in Naboth's garden and Elijah learned that no one is too far from God to experience the gift of grace. We don't know if he was nearby when Elijah called down fire again, not once but twice destroying Ahaziah's soldiers. We don't know if he was with Elijah when he looked King Ahaziah in the eye and said, "Sorry. You made your bed now die in it." We only know that under Elijah's mentorship, Elisha helps rebuild the prophetic community of Israel, creating communities of prophets around sacred sites, the sons of prophets. And we know that Elijah, as his mentor and master became like a father to him. ³

The last day begins when we are told what seemingly everyone knows. "...the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind..." (2 Kings 2:1) It is not unusual when one is about to depart. Anticipatory grief puts a muzzle on the painful truth. On his last day, like an aging rock star, Elijah decides to take a farewell tour.⁴

First, they go to Gilgal, the sacred site where Israel left the wilderness and entered the Promised Land. Joshua parted the waters of the river Jordan and led the people of Israel into the land of Canaan. There he builds an altar of twelve stones to commemorate that Yahweh was faithful, delivering on the covenantal promise.

Elijah pauses at the monument and with just a look, teaches. "You remember why this is here?" The mentor somehow communicates to the mentee. "Yes." "Good. Don't you ever forget this place. God's promises are sure." "Do you understand why we've come here?" "Yes of course." Then as if to test, Elijah says, "You stay here. I'm going on to Bethel." Elisha said, "No way!" "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." (2 Kings 2:3b) They continue his farewell tour traveling on to Bethel.

Bethel. The house of God. On the very first day of Abraham's walk with God, he pitched his tent at Bethel and "...built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD." (Genesis 12:8c) Later Jacob would swear it was a thin place, so sacred place that there was a ladder reaching to

heaven with angels ascending and descending. The sons of prophets greet them as they approach Bethel, saying to Elisha, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" (2 Kings 2:3b). "Shhh. Be quiet. Don't talk about it."

Again, there is the unspoken communication between prophet and protégé. "You know the significance of this place." "Yes of course." "Good. Don't forget this place of prayer. You will need it." "Yes of course." He is mentoring and now testing once again. "Stay here. I'm going on to Jericho." "No. Absolutely not! "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." (2 Kings 2:4b) They continue his farewell tour walking on to Jericho.

Jericho. The place of the battle. The place to remember that with a mighty shout and the sound of a trumpet, the walls came tumbling down. A place to remember that God goes with you into the battle, just as he had gone with Elijah to Mt. Carmel. Again, a company of prophets' rush to greet Elisha with the same concern on their hearts. "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you? (2 Kings 2:5b). "Stop. Shut-up about it. We aren't talking about it but yes, I know."

Once again, just as Elijah had previously reminded Elisha of the promises of Yahweh and the resource of prayer, he teaches. Unspoken but loudly communicated, the master at his end and the student about to begin, look and nod. "I know why we are here and I will remember. I will serve a powerful God." With the geographical reminders of promise, prayer, and power complete, the farewell tour is over. "We're done. Stay here. The Lord wants me on the other side of the Jordan." "No, I will not leave you."

They leave Jericho with fifty witnesses in tow, fifty of the company of prophets. Why? Maybe they wanted to swing low and sing the spiritual, anticipating Elijah's departure. Or maybe they were like gawkers on a freeway, wishing to catch a glimpse of the tragedy. Whatever the reason, they stood at a distance and watched Elijah and Elisha approach the Jordan.

Knowing this was the end, there was one last lesson to be offered. "Let me show you how this works. I'm just an ordinary person and so are you. But with the power of God and the mystic gifts of this cloak, you can be as mighty as Moses."

It makes the ordinary extraordinary. "Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other until the two of them crossed on dry ground." (2 Kings 2:8)

On the other side of the Jordan, Elijah turns to Elisha and says, "This is it. What do you want?" And like a cowboy sidling up to a bar in an old west saloon, Elisha said, "Make mine a double. Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." Elijah breathes out a sigh as if it was his last and says, "You've asked a hard thing. I keep telling you. I'm just an ordinary person, just like you. That's not up to me. But I can tell you this. Pay attention." "... if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you..." (2 Kings 2:10)

And sure enough, as they walk on, the wind picks up and begins to swirl like a tornado tearing through Kansas. Out of it comes a sound, not of a train, but a chariot on fire. It's led by horses that appear as the same. They create a space between the old prophet and prophet in waiting. Suddenly, the whirlwind lifts Elijah off his feet. With hair blown back and cloak falling off, he rises into the heavens, the chariot of fire his escort. "Elisha 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 clothes and tore them in two pieces." (2 Kings 2:12)

In his grief, he looks down, sees the mantle of Elijah, and picks it up. I'm sure he did what so many do when losing a loved one. He put it to his face and smelled it, and smells Elijah. Somehow at that moment, he heard, "Go ahead. Put it on. It's yours now." He does and walks back to the Jordan. Then, as if to confirm his newfound power, he takes it off, rolls it up, and touches the water. It parts and he crosses back over. Now the purpose of the company of prophets is revealed. They are witnesses of making the ordinary extraordinary. They shout "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him." (2 Kings 2:15)

"James was right. Elijah knew it all along. He was just an ordinary person who wore indisputable evidence that he could do extraordinary things."⁵ As Elijah's story comes to an end, with him riding a whirlwind up to heaven, he didn't worry about Elisha. He knew that God can take ordinary people, like him, like Elisha, like you and me, and make them extraordinary.

Can you imagine that? If you can, pick it up. Put it on. Wear that truth as yours. You will be surprised at the extraordinary things God will do through you.

¹ Allison, Joe. The Prophet's Cloak. Personal exegesis. August 17, 2020.

² Buechner, Frederick. Prophet. Originally published in Wishful Thinking and later in Beyond Words.

<https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/4/21/prophet>

³ Weingart, K. (2018). "My Father, My Father! Chariot of Israel and Its Horses!" (2 Kings 2:12 // 13:14): Elisha's or Elijah's Title? *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 137(2), 257–270.

⁴ Rice, G. (2006). Elijah's requirement for prophetic leadership (2 Kings 2:1-18). *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 59(1), 1–12.

⁵ Allison.