

**“WHAT’S NEXT?”**  
**2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9”2-9**  
**February 26, 2006**  
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*(Note: February 26, 2006 was designated as Seminary Sunday within the United Church of Christ. Kate Stewart, as noted in her introduction below, is one of many second career, older seminary students who work full time and attend classes at night and on weekends. )*

Good morning, my name is Kate Stewart and I’m a seminary student at Northwest House of Theological Studies (in Salem, Oregon). I’m through about four classes—going fairly slow— but I am going. I’ve been at this for just over a year and I have a number of years ahead of me. It’s an adventure. It’s going slow, but I keep going back. Each class has let me dig deeper, question more and bring back some to those around me. I wish I could tell you where God is calling me or to what, but I don’t know, I can’t see the whole picture. Right now all I can do is trust God and take the opportunities that are laid before me. Northwest House is an opportunity, speaking to you all today is a wonderful opportunity. I appreciate this chance to share a journey with you— a little bit of my journey—and thanks to the scripture readings, some of the journey of Elisha, the follower of the great prophet Elijah. The scripture readings today talk about times of transition and times of asking, “What’s next - what do I do now?” As a seminary student I can tell you that’s something I ask on a regular basis. Yet I know that this is a question that everyone deals with. People are looking for what they are “supposed to be doing”; otherwise why would books like “The Purpose Driven Life” and “What Color is your Parachute” be such successes? But let’s be fair; it’s not only about what do we do with our lives. The question comes up every time we go through any transition: A change in job, a change in family structure, the death of a loved one; the bursting from the nest of young ones; a change in a relationship for good or for bad: at each of these transitions we ask, “Now what?” The definition of “transition” is “a passing from one condition, activity place etc. to another. A shifting from one key item to another.”

The scriptures today are dealing with transitions: from Elijah to Elisha, from Jesus the miracle worker to Jesus preparing for his death. In the church season we are transitioning into Lent. The stories that are captured in the scriptures are there to help us understand what we can do with these transitions and all the others in our lives. The story of Elisha and Elijah is part of that great treasure trove of stories that were gathered for all of us to give us examples. You can think of them as stories told around the campfire. They give us heroes—Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha— and they give us guidance and examples on how to live day to day. How to respond to “Now what?”

So let’s look at the scripture: what’s here for us? What is in this story of the final parts of Elijah’s time on earth and the journey of Elisha from follower to successor that we can use? Well, the first thing I find is “Don’t Stop.” Elisha and Elijah have been traveling together for a while now. Elijah, the great prophet, the man of God who has heard God speak to him, has called fire out of the heavens, has taken on the rival priests and knows where he stands with God—and Elisha— who responds to a call not directly from God, but from God’s servant. Elisha knows of God through his teacher, his master. He hasn’t heard directly from God yet, but he is following on. And now

in the story we find out that it's time for Elijah to go away. And on this journey the teacher gives the student the chance to stop, to stay in places that had been past victories. The places that are mentioned in the story are ones that have specific meaning to the Israelite people. They served a purpose as much as the characters did and so they should have meaning to us as well.

They start out on their way from Gilgal; Gilgal is that place where the Israelites first camped when they got into the Promised Land. It is the starting point, the start of the journey, so it makes perfect logical sense that here is where they would begin. And as they head out from Gilgal, the teacher the mentor, turns to the student and says, "Stay here, I'm going on." But Elisha's response could easily be translated into today's terms as "Not on your life," I'm not stopping. I could stay at the starting point, the starting block. You have already identified me as your successor; I could rest on that. But no! I want to be where God is, so I will follow you. So on to the next stop... Bethel. Now Bethel is an important place in the Israelite tradition. Bethel, "House of God," is where Jacob meets the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and dedicates himself. It is where he sees the ladder from earth to heaven and meets God one on one. Had Elisha stopped at the start of the journey he would have missed out. Once again, Elijah turns to his protégée and says, "Stay here": stay in the house of God, this is a good place. There is even a company of prophets for you to hang out with. A good seminary perhaps. And the prophets—they come out and ask Elisha if he doesn't realize that his teacher is leaving. Why go on? Why not stay here with us? Elisha knows his teacher is leaving- but doesn't want to talk about it. Have you ever had that moment? That knowing that things are going to change, knowing that you can't stop them from changing? Well, in this story we learn that when you have that feeling the best thing to do is to jump on the ride and see where it takes you. That's what Elisha is doing. He's not stopping. He's not resting in the past places. If the teacher is moving on, so is his student.

And so they go to the next stop. . . Jericho. Jericho, the walls came down. This is a place where the community of Israel comes together and does some pretty crazy things. This is where they win their first battle - but not by their own means - they walk around the walls. They trusted God and put their lives in His hands. And once again the master turns to the student and says, "Stay here": stay in this spot where the community came together. Stay with this group of prophets and lead them; I'm going on. I'm going on to the Jordan. That crossing over point. And once again the student chooses not to stop. Each of these chances, these choices of whether to stop or go on makes me think of game shows. "You can stop here with what you have already won, or you can take a chance and follow on to the next level— take what's behind door number two." When we are trying to figure out "What's Next?", God tells us through this story: don't stop, keep moving, go to the next level, choose door number 2. Confucius said, "It does not matter how slow you go as long as you do not stop." Follow on, because then you will be in the right place for the next piece.

In our story they have now reached the Jordan. Another pivotal place for the Israelites. The place of crossing over and that's just what they do. The young student has been tenacious and stuck with this journey and now the teacher turns and says, "What can I do for you?" "What do you want?" Elisha responds with: "A double portion of your spirit." But what does that mean? According to Jewish law, a "double portion" of the inheritance was given to the firstborn son. This son would also have the honor of leading the family. By asking for a double portion of

Elijah's spirit, Elisha was asking to inherit Elijah's prophetic ministry and his ability to serve God. And Elijah tells him that this will only happen if he sees God at work. "If you see me when I am taken from you it will be yours, otherwise not."

So we learn the second thing that we must do when we are trying to figure out what's next: We must seek God; we must look for God in action. "The primary focus of our requests should always be to draw closer to God, to get in touch with the Spirit. Matthew 6:33: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." Yet where is God? We stopped the reading today at verse 12, with Elisha tearing his clothes—not knowing if he saw what he needed to see. He cries out, "The chariots and horsemen of Israel," as if to say "Is this it? Look! I see them. If this is what you mean, for the record I see them!" But now what? I want to read you the next couple of verses.

"He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water saying, 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other and Elisha went over."

So here we have Elisha crying out, "I see it; I get it!" And then right after this we find Elisha standing on the other side of the Jordan River with the fallen cloak of his master crying out, "Where is the God of Elijah?" As any good seminary student will tell you, this is a great question. Where is God? Where is God in this transition? Where is God in my life? Where is God in the death of a loved one? Where is God? Joan Chittister a Benedictine nun and author talks about meeting God in her book *Illuminated Life*. "Talking about God is not the same as searching for God... [you] do not need to go anywhere at all to find where God waits to meet [you]." God is here—God is present—God is with us. But how do we know? By learning from the story of Elisha and taking the third step—take a chance.

So have you got the scene in your head: Here's Elisha, standing on one side of the Jordan river; the one man who he has followed is gone. All he's got left is a balled up piece of wool that passes as a cloak, a river to cross, and did I forget to mention the fifty people waiting on the other side? His clothes are torn. He is crying out, "Where is the God of Elijah?" And he takes a chance. . . he raises up the cloak just like he saw his teacher do and smacks the river. How much hope, how much faith, how much fear is in that simple action. He might fail and have to face the fifty guys across the river. What if this isn't the right move? What if he gets it wrong? I can almost see him smacking the water with his eyes closed: "Where is the God of Elijah?" and then peeking with one eye to see what happened. And what happened? God. God shows up and parts the water for him to cross. God was right there; but Elisha wouldn't have known it if he hadn't taken that chance, if he hadn't started moving again, if he wasn't willing to risk it.

All right. At this point let me admit to you that this seems to be almost too much of a happy ending. I've had situations where I've taken a chance, decided what to do and found out—OOPS—that wasn't right. In the story in Mark we get to see that side. Peter, James and John are on the mountain seeing the great teachers: Moses, representative of the Law; Elijah, representative of the prophets; and Jesus, shining bright representative of the fulfillment of the Law and the

prophets—and he takes a chance and says, “This is good - let’s stay here -we’ll build something.” And God shows up and says, “This is my beloved son”; and Jesus says to Peter, “Don’t talk about this yet.” Peter took a chance as to what he should do and got it wrong; but God still showed up; God was still there; and God was able to redirect Peter. So it was still worth it for him to take that chance.

I told you at the beginning that I don’t know where I am going. I find myself identifying with the main character in the book *Lying Awake* when she says, “I don’t have it all worked out, but I’m ready. I want to try working with what I’ve got instead of wishing I had something else.” I’m willing to take a chance and I hope you will to.

So now what? Where do we go from here? We take the stories from the past and we retell them in our own way. In the song, *The River*, Garth Brooks sings a similar challenge to us: “Too many times we stand aside and let the waters slip away Until what we put off until tomorrow—it has now become today. So don’t you sit upon the shore line and say you’re satisfied—choose to chance the rapids and dare to dance the tide.” It goes on, “There’s bound to be rough water, and I know I’ll take some falls, but with the good Lord as my captain, I can make it through them all.”

Be tenacious in your desire to be where God is doing something. Don’t stop at the beginning; don’t stop with just your one on one with God; don’t stop where God has done something before; don’t stand aside and let it flow by: seek out God; look for that connection to the flow of life and take a chance. Step out; chance the rapids. God will be able to direct you and redirect you and you will be able to move on to what’s next.