

Margreta Silverstone: Whom Do You Trust?

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Whom Do You Trust?

When I signed up to preach today, I had a whole other plan for what I was going to talk about. As the date came closer, I realized my original intent was not right. Therefore, I stand up here humbly, a little uncertain, and clearly desiring that what I say be worthy.

I want to take us through a brief guided meditation. Just close your eyes for a minute. Focus on your breath. Breathe in. Let the air fill your lungs. Feel the breath go down in your body. Breathe out. Let the air come out through your mouth. Breathe in....Breathe out.

Now imagine yourself walking along the side of a road. You are walking and talking with some friends. You are planning your day and the activities you will do on the Fourth of July, maybe a picnic, maybe going to see the fireworks. You are enjoying the company of your friends. A person is approaching you. While you cannot see clearly yet, because you are too far away, something about the person that looks familiar. When the person gets closer to you, the person says, "Come, follow me."

Now you recognize who it is, she is your mother.

What do you feel? What do you say? Do you follow?

Imagine the same scene, but the person is not your mother. The person who says, "Come, follow me." is the President.

Do you follow? Is your reaction different? Why is it different?

Finally, image the same scene again, but it is not the President, and it is not your mother. Now you see it is Sonya.

Do you follow? Is your reaction different? Why is it different?

Hold these different feelings and reactions and come back to the present.

Ever since the Genesis class with Dave and Steve, the Hebrew Scripture stories have engaged me. I like their messiness. The stories are not neat with full character development, full plot development and clear conclusions. There is room to imagine what was going on with the people involved. The Hebrew Scripture passage and the Gospel passage hold up the questions of following someone. At first, they may seem opposite from each other; but from my perspective, they are related.

In 2 Kings, we pick up the last part of Elijah's life and meet Elisha. Last week, we heard about Elijah going to the cave and waiting to meet God. In that same cave, God told Elijah to go and anoint a new King and find Elisha and anoint him to be a protégé prophet for Elijah. Elijah found Elisha out plowing a field and anointed him. Elisha then kissed his parents goodbye and went to serve Elijah. That is about all we know about Elisha so far.

Based on references to the Kings that reigned in Israel that are in I Kings 19 – 2 Kings 2, we can estimate that Elisha has been serving and learning from Elijah for at least 2 years. Our lectionary reading for today picks up with the story that Elijah somehow knows his time is ending and so sets out to visit some of the other prophets before he leaves. He asks Elisha not to follow. Nevertheless, Elisha insists and goes to

Bethel. Just in those few sentences, the story gets messy. Why did Elijah not want Elisha to follow? How did Elijah know his time was up?

We skipped over this text in the lectionary, but I want to fill in the picture. There are a number of prophets in Bethel who meet them and tell Elisha that they know Elijah is leaving. Elisha does not want to hear about it.

After visiting Bethel, Elijah travels to Jericho and again asks Elisha to stay behind. Elisha refuses. In Jericho, another group of prophets tells Elisha that they know Elijah is leaving, but Elisha still does not want to hear about it.

Why doesn't Elisha want them to talk about it? Is it just because he does not want to know that Elijah is leaving? Is that he just does not want to hear personally bad news? The passage does not tell us why, leaving us room to draw our own conclusions. Maybe Elisha just wanted to ignore their comments. Unfortunately, two bands of prophets are saying the same thing, making it hard to ignore.

We pick up the text again with the trip from Jericho to the Jordan. A third time Elijah asks Elisha to stay behind, but he will not. Therefore, they travel together to the Jordan. Fifty prophets from Jericho go along and stand at the banks of the Jordan as well.

While Elijah gave three opportunities to take the easy route, to stay behind, each time Elisha made the choice to follow. After years of staying with Elijah, Elisha stays committed to this man and does not leave him. What is so important about Elijah that Elisha sticks with him?

At the Jordan, Elijah does not ask Elisha to stay behind. Maybe Elijah knew it would not do any good anyway. Then Elijah uses his cloak to part the waters and the two of them cross.

However, the prophets stay behind looking at the parted

waters. Why didn't they follow? There was no reason why they could not have gone.

Maybe it was a matter of trust. For Elijah to cross the Jordan, he needed to trust God. Elijah trusted God when he struck the water with his cloak. It could have been that nothing happened when he did that act. Recently I have been confronted with my own lack of trust in God. I would not expect the waters of the Potomac to separate if I hit it with my jacket. Maybe the prophets did not trust God enough either.

Therefore, Elijah had to trust God to cross the Jordan. However, for Elisha to cross, he had to trust too. He trusted Elijah. After spending so much time learning from Elijah, serving Elijah, Elisha had learned to trust this man and this man's relationship to God. I know a number of people in my life who, because of my long relationships/friendships with them, I trust. While I might not understand their vision, their desire, their faith, I trust them enough to go along with them and help them with whatever they are doing. Are there people in Seekers who you trust enough to follow? I know there are people here in Seekers who I trust. I do not necessarily share their vision, but I do not doubt their relationship to God. Because of their faith, I will follow where they think we need to be going. This is becoming especially true as I look at the Carroll Street property. The prophets did not seem to have that trust in Elijah or Elisha. They had been taught by Elijah and seen Elisha, but their trust in these two people was not enough to have them follow.

Maybe it was a matter of awe and feeling unworthy. Joshua also crossed this place at the Jordan when the Israelites first came to this land. Certainly, everyone would have remembered the significance of this place. What the prophets just witnessed was a miracle of dry land through the Jordan again. Maybe they felt unworthy to claim a place, along with these two men, in this historic event. Maybe they felt they were not holy or devote enough to participate in this action.

After crossing the river, Elijah asks Elisha what he wants before Elijah leaves. Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. It is not so much that Elisha really wanted two times the amount of spirit. Rather what Elisha was doing was claiming that his relationship to Elijah was like that of a son to a father. In the inheritance laws of the Jewish people, the eldest son could expect to receive a larger portion of the land of the father. Since Elijah was a prophet, Elisha was requesting to continue the occupation of prophet. Elisha wanted to continue the prophet inheritance.

While Elisha's relationship to God has so far been through Elijah, now Elisha's request is also about claiming/desiring a direct relationship to God. Moreover, Elisha's request for this direct relationship as an inheritance is a demonstration of his willingness to give up everything else for this. It was not just trust; it was commitment. Elisha's claim of Elijah as a parental relationship was not a natural thing. Claiming this level of relationship also meant that Elisha was giving Elijah authority over his life, as much as children live with the authority of their parents. Elisha was also naming this relationship as more important than the fields he would have inherited from his biological father. Do you have any relationships that are like this? Have you a relationship where you are committed to serve with your time and resources at a moment's notice?

Elijah recognized the significance and difficulty of what Elisha was asking for when he asked for a double portion of his spirit. Elijah's response was a test of whether Elisha's commitment was deep enough. Keeping sight of Elijah in the middle of chariots and horses of fire would require a deep devotion and trust. The levels of our commitments to our friends, our family, our faith in God, is tested by how well we stay focused and pay attention to them and their needs and not get diverted by the noise and wonder of the moment. I do not do well in this. I easily wrap myself up in my job and my

worries. Sometimes I do not give a thought to Seekers, my friends, my family or my faith.

Elisha passed the test. Moreover, he was given Elijah's mantle. Now Elisha had to continue the prophetic inheritance, he was committed now to following God directly, not through Elijah. In addition, given everything that was waiting for him, including those 50 prophets on the other side of the Jordan, he had much to accomplish. He was left with Elijah's mantle. It could serve as a visible reminder to Elisha of the person he had followed and the miracles that Elijah accomplished. The garment could be a source of encouragement in tough times. One source I read said that the mantle was not just any garment, but a prayer shawl. Somehow, that seems appropriate. Elisha could continue his commitment with the power of prayer. Elisha went back to the Jordan River. There he tested out whether he had received the inheritance by striking the water. Moreover, it did part, allowing him to cross over the river.

In the Gospel passage, Jesus invited three people to have a direct relationship/commitment to him and to God. Unlike Elijah who wanted Elisha to go away, Jesus invited people into a relationship with him like the relationship Elisha had with Elijah. To the first, he pointed out that the commitment to follow would mean lack of physical possessions, even to the point of being homeless. To the second and third person, Jesus pointed out this commitment would take priority over family. Jesus wanted these people to claim a relationship with him that was more important than saying goodbye to one's family or staying at home until one's parent died and was buried. These people could not make that level of commitment and service. While the Gospel passages are a little neater than the Hebrew Scriptures we still do not know what these people thought about these challenges to commitment. All we know is they could not do it and went away. I wonder what the prophets from Jericho would have said or done had Elijah invited them to

cross the Jordan with him?

A direct commitment to following God is not easy. It was not an easy choice for Elisha, but it was an option he wanted and clearly went to great lengths to have. It took time to develop, the assistance of a good mentor in Elijah and prayer to continue.

Two weeks ago, [Peter Bankson preached](#) about the kite above us. He spent some time talking about the need to be open to the wind that is God's love. How, in response to that wind, we need to pass along gifts, like the tail. Peter did mention the sticks that form the structure of the kite are necessary for it to be open to the wind. In the sermon, he said the sticks were discipline. I think the structure of the kite, the silent piece that helps a kite be able to be ready for the wind is about the discipline of commitment. Not just any commitment, but a commitment to specific relationships that can keep us open to God. We need to trust and use prayer to keep us focused on those relationships and to obey those relationships so we can be open to God's love.

Whom do you trust? Whom do you listen to or obey? Whom do you follow?