

The Stunning Outcome of a One-Person Search Committee

I Kings 19:19-21; II Kings 2:9-15; Luke 9:59-62

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The work of some search committees is long, complicated, and quite public, surrounded by many rumors and much intrigue. Other search committees operate quickly, quietly, and simply, rather like the judges at the Westminster Dog Show—one judge looks and points to the winner, and the dogs did not even know the process was going on. The case of Elijah as a search committee is of the latter type. Elijah's decision is quick and terse, so terse that he does not say anything. He finds Elisha doing field work (with twelve yoke of oxen!), and he throws his mantle over him. The choice is decisive; the deed is done irreversibly, and Elisha knows it:

Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you
(I Kings 19:20).

No discussion, no negotiation, no terms of call.

For these days, I have had search committees on my mind, as had Elijah. Be assured, I am not thinking here of the search for a president that ended happily with Laura Mendenhall. There is no need to talk about that, for it is a done deal and we are all elated. Out of this text, rather, I imagined the great Association of Theological Schools Accrediting Agency in the sky consisting in One Person—or Three Persons in one substance, depending on how one counts—conducting a search for just one responsive seminary. I imagined that the search is quick and quiet and simple, so that most do not know the search is underway. Imagine just now, just today, just in our imagination that search committee is eyeing this seminary, anticipating that this might be the one for the coming days of mission. And if the Search Committee in the sky reaches such a conclusion, then it will, of course, accord with what many of us think anyway, that this seminary *is* the one for the coming days of mission.

I.

Elisha's response to Elijah's search decision is quick and short and to the point. He says, "I will follow you." I am ready. I just need to do three quick things, and then I follow without reservation.

One: Elisha wraps the mantle tight around his body, the palpable sign of God's summons, to see how it feels and how it fits, to be reassured that there is a workable match between the call and the mantle or alternatively, as we say, to see if for him there is a convergence of "deep gladness and the world's deep need."

Two: Elisha wanted to go home and kiss his mom and dad. Perhaps he wanted their

This sermon was preached at Columbia Theological Seminary on April 25, 2001, in connection with the inauguration of President Laura Mendenhall.

permission. Maybe he wanted them to appreciate and affirm his high calling. Or perhaps he was frightened enough that he did not want to soar off into newness without firm rootage. He did not slough off his parents; he valued them.

It occurs to me that, like Elisha, the seminary picked by the great Accrediting Agency for the new season of mission in the twenty-first century better kiss parents and ancestors. It better touch the past, better treasure the heritage, better remember the best hopes and dreams all the family has entertained before now. And I imagine, as was said about Abraham Heschel when he left his Jewish ghetto in Poland and went off to study in Berlin, that he had a two-way ticket and must have often returned to kiss his mother and father, for what is asked of him now is connected to what is old and treasured.

Three: Elisha took the twelve yoke of oxen with which he was plowing (he was like most Columbia Seminary folk, quite upper middle class). He killed and butchered them and had a great feast. Everyone in the village was so excited about his call that they lavished their endowment on the future. No keeping back ten or eight or six or even two oxen for a rainy season; the feast to mark a time of glad obedience must be extravagant; no parsimony when the search committee acts.

And then says the narrator, he set out to follow Elijah:

Test the call with the mantle;
Embrace the tradition with a kiss;
Lavish the endowment on the future.

II.

And then, in the next episode, Elisha watched Elijah ascend. He pleaded with Elijah: Please let me inherit a double portion of your spirit. I take it he means the spirit of God that had infused Elijah. Elisha knew what he needed. He needed the “force of God” for the dangers ahead, the force that would matter decisively—after he had tested the call with the mantle; after he had embraced the tradition with a kiss; after he had lavished the endowment on the future. Elisha needed more than he could control or enact. He needed a gift from God.

He picked up the mantle, now ready. He struck the water of the Jordan, and it parted! He did a new Exodus like Moses, what we used to call “God’s mighty deed in history.” The community of supporters gathered around him. They were shrewd observers, like an ordination commission, and they said: “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.” Search process completed!

He asked for a double portion, and he received it. And he never looked back! He was blown by the wind into places he had never thought to go, to enact things he had never thought to do. Now I know this is just an inaugural festival; it is not a Pentecost. But notice that “following” creates the conditions whereby the “force” is given that moves the nominee into a new range of activity, into a future radically different from his past.

III.

Then follows the work of the wind through this Elisha. The future is given in Israel through this mantle-wearing, parent-kissing, oxen-butcherer, wind-blown disciple.

The spirit propels this called one into a concrete *economic situation of poverty and*

scarcity (II Kings 4:1-7). Elisha meets up with a widow whose life is to be shut down by a creditor. The narrative uses specifically economic terms of “creditor/debtor”; Elisha plunges into the middle of the crisis. He overwhelms the hapless widow with oil, that most precious commodity. All the neighbors bring their pots and pans; the oil keeps running, because it takes a village to receive all the new gifts. In the end, the woman pays all her debts and can live again. The narrator does not ask how this happened, but the answer would have been, a double portion of the spirit!

The spirit pushes the candidate to commit *an overt ecumenical act*, a ministry outside his well-defined Israel (II Kings 5:1-19). Naaman, the Syrian general, grudgingly comes to Elisha with leprosy, and he is healed. So Jesus remembers:

There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:27)

The healed general offers to pay for the healing, but Elisha refuses. Then the general apologizes to the prophet, and says, “You know, I am a political general and when I return home, I will be in a media event in the cathedral, worshipping Rimmon, a God other than the one that has healed me.” Elisha, great ecumenist that he is who anticipates later pluralism, says to him, “Shalom, go in peace,” that is, “never mind.”

The prophet who succeeds Elijah is dispatched by the spirit *into the world of death*, there to enact God’s gift of life (II Kings 4:32-37). He had given to the Shunemite woman a son, but the son died. The mother of the dead son has complete confidence in Elisha, and so the prophet goes to the dead boy, prays, breathes mouth to mouth with the *ruah*, and the boy lives. The narrative lets us see that this double-portioned carrier is an Easter force for life in a world where the power of death is vibrant and pervasive. In the narrative life will win, carried by the prophet.

The prophet is led by the spirit to an *intimate pastoral crisis where there is a lack of food* (II Kings 4:42-44). That lack signifies that God’s creation is not fully functioning. There is such a mismatch of need and resources, only twenty loaves of barley, and then abruptly...he feeds them. The bread is passed under his double spirit; we are told that a hundred people ate. They ate and had some left, according to the word of the Lord. This act, so laden with Eucharistic thickness, anticipates the feeding Jesus will do.

These acts constitute an amazing catalogue of transformative miracles:

- an economic intervention that redresses the life of creditors and debtors;
- an overt ecumenical act that values those unlike “us”;
- an Easter foray into the sphere of death to bring life;
- a pastoral of feeding, bespeaking the generosity of the Creator.

No doubt all of these stories are designed to celebrate and enhance this remembered figure of power who had *a cloak, a kiss, a festival*, and worked in awesome ways to make things new. No doubt all the stories, theologically self-conscious, witness to God’s governance in the large and small places of the world where it was thought they were autonomous. In truth, these stories are not simply about God’s governance, or simply about the oddness of the prophet, but about the *strange, unfamiliar convergence of human agency and divine sovereignty allied for a newness* that the world had

not yet imagined. The stunning outcome of this search process was the release of power for life in a world weary with the gap between creditors and debtors, exhausted with faith turned in on itself exclusively, despairing in the face of the power of death to which there seemed no antidote, fed up with so many little children to feed and not enough bread. Here we are treated not to explanations, but only to a terse summons, a rush of energy, God's power for life given concrete, fleshly form. We are brought up short before the power for life that is so unspeakable that when Elisha dies several chapters later they threw another dead body into his grave with his body, and that one came alive when it touched the still bones of Elisha (II Kings 13:20-231). This double-portioned man continues, it is said, to be a force for life even in his own death. Of course this is all legend. It is remote from us. It is personal and not institutional, spun by the spirit and not at all decent and in order. It has, surely, nothing to do with us. Except we never know with a *cloak* and a *kiss* and *oxen butchered*, and the force sent anew.

IV.

You will notice I have not yet come to the Gospel reading. As usual, Jesus is more radical than the antecedents in Israel. Elijah let his designee go kiss his mother and father. Jesus said, "Forget about them." Jesus seems to call to a more radical break—no time to go home first. But the cases are not quite parallel. Evidently Elisha's mother and father are alive and well, functioning and supportive of this new place where deep gladness and the deep need of the world converge. In the second case, the father is already dead. In that case, the demand is sharper: Do not go back to death. Do not kiss a corpse.

It occurs to me, that when the great Accrediting Agency in the sky points, one task for the designee is to sort out vibrant, pertinent antecedents and failed antecedents that will give no life. Jesus' word is, do not spend energy on failed antecedents, but unload them to travel light in obedience.

Perhaps:

- leave off old memories that are small and suffocating;
- leave off old speeches that seem to need one more utterance in one more meeting;
- leave off pet projects whereby an incidental has become definitional;
- leave off old hurts and affronts that are revisited too often to permit healing;
- leave off the shrillness that always needs to make one more "statement";
- leave off old fears and hates and angers that block the wind, old modes of doctrine (liberal or conservative) that are only cultural accidents, and old moralities (liberal or conservative) that are, in fact, disguised fear and vested interest.

The one he addressed was ready, but said:

I will follow you Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.

Jesus, however, is an impatient search committee:

None who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. (v. 62)

So imagine a Search Committee dreaming of the coming governance:

- we with a cloak of emancipated responsibility;
- we with vibrant mothers and fathers to embrace and failed mothers and fathers to relinquish.
- we with twelve oxen or more, but not finally dependent on market fluctuations.
- propelled into economic situations of creditors and debtors;
- pushed into ecumenical contexts, healing among those who are long time outsiders and alien to us;
- dispatched into a world where death is strong, in order to enact gestures of new life;
- led into intimate places of need to feed and house and cloth, with as many as twelve baskets left over.

Seminaries like ours are mostly equipped for the steadiness of twentieth-century denominational patterns. And now come the twenty-first century and the purposes of God in, with, and under and beyond all the structures, categories, and procedures so comfortable and familiar to us.

The Search Committee, so says the text, is able to find a candidate ready to be propelled, pushed, dispatched, led, summoned to the places where “deep gladness and deep need” converge. It is hard to measure the gift of the spirit about to be given among us. But it is, we surmise, doubled in joy and with names written in heaven. Doubled is a lot, more than enough!