

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:2-9

11 February, 2018



"If you cannot teach me to fly, teach me to sing."

A line from author J. M. Barrie that came to mind this past Thursday as I took my children to the Lovett School to see a performance of *Peter Pan*. As Atlantan high schoolers soared across the stage and we all made our way to Neverland, it was a delight to follow once more the adventures of a hero who just refused to grow old.

Well, the theater where we saw that fantastic production this week has a name on it, of another couple of Peter Pan's who have similarly refused to get any older, even as the decades have passed, our own Beth and Ray Chenault. To quote Barrie once more, "I suppose it's like the ticking crocodile, isn't it? Time is chasing after all of us." Ray and Beth, we had been hoping that time would not chase you down quite yet, but after 86 years of combined service to this church, I think you might well have deserved to put your feet up for a while, and then go and see some of Neverland for yourselves.

Music has been and remains such an integral part of this church's life and mission. How many lives have been touched by it through this dear couple's years of service, do you imagine? How many of you sitting here this morning have felt yourselves transported, lifted up, levitated just a little by the grace and beauty of what you have heard and felt here? For music in worship, when it is offered with faithfulness and intricate care, when it is soulful and sensitive, when it resonates with our joys and our sorrows, has the capacity to reach the inner ear of our souls, and fill us, as Christ, with light. Such have been the gifts offered here by Ray and Beth Chenault, and we are profoundly thankful for them.

The life we share in the church is, of course, filled with joyous arrivals and heartfelt farewells. Indeed, it is our sadness in saying goodbye that teaches us how very deeply we have been loved and honored by those who are departing. You won't have to struggle, I don't imagine, to find parallel farewells from within your own life: the loss of family and friends; career transitions or moves across state lines, each of them offering little epiphanies into the depth of how we value the lives that weave their way in and out of ours.

Yet, as used to this pattern of fondness and farewell that we might be, it can still be so hard to let go of what we love and value. I wonder whether this was also Elisha's experience as we encounter him in our first reading, following along with the aged prophet Elijah; struggling with the departure of one he admired.

However, Elisha's refrain - "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you" - is more than merely a desire for time on the road with an old friend, for the Elisha and Elijah story teaches us what faithfulness looks like when it knows how to honor the past, and at the same time be courageous enough to step into the future. Indeed, as we seek to honor the extraordinary legacy of the past 40 and more years of music in this parish, yet also look with hope and confidence to the future, there are few better paradigms to be mindful of than these two ancient Israelite prophets.

The first lesson is that memory matters. If we pay attention to the sequence of places that Elisha follows Elijah to, we notice that there is an intentionality to their wandering: from Gilgal, the place where the Israelites camped in

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their nomadic years; to Bethel, the sacred site of worship; to Jericho, where Israel had established its military power and moved from nomads to city dwellers - each one has its significance, marking out the growth to maturity that the freed Hebrew slaves had made. This return to the old stomping grounds of Israel's collective memory offers to the new prophet, Elisha, the reassurance not only that there is strength in the depth of that shared experience, but the reminder that through each of those steps - the challenges and the triumphs - God had walked with them.

Yet, as powerful as memory can be in teaching us who we have been and how we have known God's faithfulness, the second lesson these prophets of old have for us is that the future can look a lot more like the past than we often care to admit. Perhaps the hardest struggle we can have - both as communities and in our individual lives - is the blockage of the road ahead by an all too familiar and seemingly immovable object.

How often we can find ourselves in such a predicament, able to trace the steps of what seem like progress on our life's journey, only to find ourself back to face a challenge we had thought was at this point behind us. I wonder, how much do you continue to live into behaviors of the past that you had first experienced in your family of origin? And how much, when we look at the world around us, do we see our shared history repeating itself, from the new slavery of incarcerated labor, to today's McCarthy-esque anti-intellectualism and the gerrymandering of political culture, that sees difference as unpatriotic and dialogue as a threat. For as much as we find delight in dancing our way out of Egypt and on into the land of God's promised abundance, the journey has a habit of taking us right back to where we had started.

It is the memory of the flight from Egypt that sits in the middle of Elijah and Elisha's path in the form of the seemingly immovable object known as the River Jordan, repeating the narrative flow of the exodus with the Red Sea standing between the Hebrews and their freedom in the wilderness. Yet, it is what happens next that is most instructive, for the final lesson the prophets have to teach is as old as they come: trust that the God who calls is faithful.

Easy to say, hard to live into. Imagine for a moment, if you will, what it might have been like to be Elijah, standing back at the water's edge, the shadow of the great prophet Moses cast upon him, while his protege, Elisha, stands beside him. Still, Elijah has the courage to act, to trust in the faithfulness of God, and as he strikes the water, the river makes a dry path and the prophets pass through.

God alone knows who will step into those mighty big shoes at our organ console this summer as we say goodbye to what has been. I do know that they will have to have the good sense to gently place those shoes aside, and find their own feet, trusting that God has called them to serve in this place, and that their gifts for music and community are exactly what are needed for the present and for the future of this church. For in the end, when we are faced with the challenges of the past, we must simply commit ourselves to a divine vision for reality that always surpasses our own capacity to see; we have to trust that as we step into the unknown, grace has already gone before.

43 years ago, two even younger looking twenty-something musicians were given the opportunity to step into such an unknown. Who could have known how that leap of faith would have worked out. Well, I guess we can say now that God knows, just as God knows how each of us is made for our own unique act of transfiguration; one-of-a-kind vessels of the beauty and glory of the divine. "If you cannot teach me to fly, teach me to sing;" yet if we can learn to sing the songs of a faithful God, really, the sky is the limit.

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