

Sunday, July 1 (1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Luke 9: 51-62)

by [Peter S. Hawkins](#) in the [June 6, 2001](#) issue

The lectionary loves to take biblical texts that share some things in common and then watch as worlds collide once differences come to light. This week's comparison-contrast of call stories is a perfect case in point. The story in 1 Kings 19 comes directly from God's lips to Elijah's ears and from there to Elisha's shoulders. Elijah has taken refuge in a cave on Mount Horeb, the same mountain, elsewhere known as Sinai, upon whose height Moses received the tablets of the Law. Told to confront the Almighty on sacred territory, the prophet takes his life in his hands as the Lord "passes by."

In a famous sequence of wind, earthquake and fire, the noise of theophany is overwhelming; but it is only with the stunning quiet of the aftermath that the Lord speaks to Elijah in the "sound of sheer silence." Anoint Elisha, says the "still small voice," for he will take your place as the prophet of the Lord.

Coming down from the mountain, Elijah finds his successor working behind 12 yoke of oxen, plowing his family's field. One can only imagine the frightening figure Elijah must have cut—"a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist." He is on the run from Ahab and Jezebel after bloody conflicts with the priests of Baal and is fed by ravens and impecunious widows. This denizen of mountains and caves walks past Elisha without uttering a word. Instead of speaking, Elijah takes off his cloak and places it on the no-doubt trembling shoulders of the astonished Elisha, signaling thereby that the "son of Shapat" had a new father and a new destiny. The private life of agriculture and husbandry was over, and an unknown path was the one to follow.

Was this an opportunity that Elisha had been waiting for without realizing it—the chance to break away from the yoke of work and family and a lifetime of fields to be plowed? Or was there something about Elijah and his surrendered mantle that overwhelmed any secondary considerations, such as what it would mean to rush past the fifth commandment about honoring one's father and mother and instead leave them in the lurch? We are told only that Elisha "ran after Elijah," kissed his parents, sacrificed to the Lord his yoke of oxen—talk about burning bridges!—and

“set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant” (1 Kings 19: 21).

It is hard to think Luke didn't have this story in mind when he tells of Jesus' ministry in the days just before “he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Not very long ago, he had called his disciples away from their families and work, and had picked up more men and women along the way as he set about “proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.” People were eager to say yes. Every field had an Elisha ready to sign on.

And then things began to change. When a Samaritan village decided that Jews who were on their way to the wrong temple deserved no welcome, Sons of Thunder James and John thought the situation warranted a revival of what happened at Sodom and Gomorrah: “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down and consume them?” The answer was no, and the pilgrims continued on their way.

What Jesus then encounters is a series of possible disciples who, unlike Elisha, want to know the terms of the call and need to explore the possibilities for negotiation. “I will follow you wherever you go,” says one brave soul, who then seems to have dropped by the side when he realizes that the Son of Man and his followers cannot count on foxholes and nests when they are weary. Someone has a funeral to go to and filial obligations to carry out. Another should attend his own farewell party. But Jesus is uncompromising. The kingdom needs proclaiming more than the dead need to be buried. The half-hearted should not apply: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The attentive reader remembers how Elisha kissed his folks goodbye, slaughtered his yoke of oxen, and not only followed Elijah but stuck to him like a burr: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” On Horeb, Elijah had complained to God that he alone was left faithful to the Lord, but once Elisha came onto the scene he was never alone. There was someone who would not go away, someone to watch as the fiery chariot took off for the heavens and the prophet's mantle fell into Elisha's open arms.

Luke goes out of his way to tell us that the Son of Man enjoyed no such fate. Instead of a chariot to take him to heaven, he died an excruciating death. Instead of a faithful follower who gave up everything to heed his call, he had one disciple who betrayed him with a kiss, another who denied him three times and ten others who ran for cover.

The story of Elijah and his successor comforts us with the realization that while a good man is hard to find, there is always an Elisha to prove the rule with a glorious exception. The gospel insists that the cost of discipleship is steep and the reasons for evading the call are as numerous as the sands of the sea and the stars of the sky. Luke's words should make us uneasy if we are praying glibly for the kingdom, yet lack the willingness to set a finger on the plow or take a bold step onto the road.