

*These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.*

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## 2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14

NRSV

Israel has split into two kingdoms: Israel (the north) and Judah (the south). At the time of our story, (850-849 BC), Ahaziah is King of Israel. The Bible tells us that only two people were sufficiently worthy to be taken up to heaven without dying: Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah. Elijah and Elisha start their journey at Gilgal, in the hill country north of Bethel. Three times (vv. 2-3, 4-5, 6) Elijah invites Elisha to travel no further: he tests Elisha, to determine whether he is truly loyal to his master. Each time, Elisha proves his loyalty, and so the two travel southward from "Gilgal" (v. 1) to "Bethel" (v. 2), then east to "Jericho" (v. 4) and "the Jordan" (v. 6). (Note that vv. 4-5 differ from vv. 2-3 only in the place name.) The "company of prophets" (vv. 3, 5, 7) are communities of followers, disciples, of Elijah; they are like monks.

Elijah's "mantle" (v. 8), his cloak, is almost part of him. As in the crossing of the Reed Sea (Exodus 14) and in the carrying of the Ark across the Jordan (Joshua 3:14-17), the waters miraculously part. In v. 9, Elijah offers Elisha a reward for his loyalty; then Elisha requests that he receive the principal share ("double") of Elijah's spirituality. (Deuteronomy 21:17 requires that the eldest son inherit a double portion of his father's estate.) Per v. 10, Elijah cannot grant this request himself, for it is God's to give. If Elisha sees Elijah taken up, God has granted the wish. "Fire" (v. 11) is a symbol of God's presence (e.g. God appeared in the burning bush in Exodus 3:2.) V. 12a is difficult to interpret. Perhaps Elisha contrasts the chariots of God (v. 11) with those of Israel, or perhaps Elisha recognizes that Elijah's spiritual strength is better security for Israel than its army. Elisha does see Elijah's departure. Tearing of clothes (v. 12) was an expression of grief or distress. Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle, the symbol of spirituality (vv. 13-14). The water again parts. God recognizes Elisha as Elijah's successor, as do the "company of prophets" (v. 15). Some of them search for days to find Elijah's body, but in vain (vv. 16-17). Elijah has been taken up to heaven.

## Psalms 77:1-2,11-20

NRSV

The psalmist prays for deliverance from unspecified "trouble" (v. 2). He may speak for himself, or for the community. He is probably keeping an all-night vigil in the Temple (v. 4); he is so troubled that he cannot petition God. Vv. 7-10 tell of his mental agony: has God spurned him (and Israel)? Has God gone back on his promise proclaimed to Moses in Exodus 34:6? In vv. 11-15, the psalmist gains some hope by recalling God's mighty actions in the past. God is "holy" (v. 13): his ways are mysterious, different. He rescued Israel from Egypt ("Jacob and Joseph", v. 15). Vv. 16-19 are in a different metre, a fragment of an ancient hymn. The "waters" are the Reed Sea; in the Song of Moses (Exodus 15), the enemies

are those who are afraid, but here it is the waters. God spoke through natural phenomena, particularly through fire ("flashed", v. 17; "lightnings", v. 18). God provided a "way" (v. 19) through the Sea, and led Israel through "Moses and Aaron" (v. 20).

## Galatians 5:1,13-25

NRSV

Paul wrote this letter to counter certain evangelists in Galatia who expected Christians to adopt some (but not all) practices of Judaism. They seem to have argued: so long as you are circumcised and keep Jewish feasts, you are free to do anything you like – you can indulge in "the flesh" (v. 16, self-centeredness and the vices listed in vv. 19-21). Paul denounces this theology vehemently. He has said that what "counts is faith working through love" (v. 6). In v. 14, he may be thinking of Leviticus 19:18, or a contemporary Jewish summary of the Law, or of Jesus' summary. In v. 16, "live" is literally *walk by*, a Semitism for *conduct yourself*. The way of God, brought to us by the Spirit, is incompatible with doing whatever we wish (v. 17). The way of the Spirit also brings freedom from an external norm, i.e. the Law, for our norm is within us (v. 18). The results of living by the Spirit are in v. 22; note that the first is "love". V. 24 is a summary: Christians share in Christ's death to worldliness; we died ("crucified", cast aside) not only to the Law but also to self-centeredness and its degrading tendencies. We have undergone a basic re-orientation – to God. Thus reoriented, our actions should be guided "by the Spirit" (v. 25).

## Luke 9:51-62

NRSV

In telling us of the Transfiguration, Luke has told us that Peter, John and James have seen Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus "of his departure [exodus], which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:31). Now Jesus approaches the time when he will be "taken up" (v. 51), i.e. crucified, raised from the dead, and restored to glory with the Father. Jesus resolutely travels to the city where this will happen. He sends "messengers" (v. 52) to arrange food and lodging for him and his disciples. "Samaritans" did not help pilgrims going to keep feasts in Jerusalem because they believed the true temple to be theirs (on Mount Gerizim). James and John ask: do you wish them to be treated as Elijah treated followers of Baal? (v. 54) Jesus has taught non-retaliation against enemies (v. 55), but the point here is that any temple (and Law) is irrelevant: it is trust in him that counts.

Vv. 57-62 contain sayings about discipleship which are hard to interpret because Jesus exaggerates to jolt his listeners out of complacency. The "Son of Man" is Jesus, the exemplary human. Those who follow him will not have a *resting place*, a position to which they can resort: there is no room for conservatism. We are to launch continually into new ways of being Christian. Burying a parent (v. 59) was deemed important in Jewish culture, but proclaiming the good news must have priority (v. 60). We must answer a call to tell the good news *immediately* (v. 61). A Palestinian plow required constant attention; diverting one's attention for a moment led to disaster. Jesus demands constancy and concentration in proclaiming his message; once committed to Christ, there is no going back.