

## **OK. So, now what?** **Dan Yuen** **West Valley Presbyterian Church**

Pastor Kim last Sunday in the pulpit was last week. So, what do we do now?

Psychologists will tell you that grief comes from a sense of loss. It may be the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a marriage, or the loss of a job, or the realization that you have lost your youth. But when you encounter loss, you feel grief. And psychologists will also tell you that when you grieve, there are frequently five stages to the grieve – Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance, not always in this order. Some stages repeat. And some stages never happen.

But, long before Swiss-American psychologist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross studied grief during times when people are dying, long before she popularized the five stages of grief in her foundational book, “On Death and Dying” in 1969, we had Exhibit A in the Bible as a follower of God had to come to grips with the loss of his spiritual leader.

I’d like to read that story to you in a bit, but first, I wonder if we could start with a word of prayer.

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Our scripture today comes from 2 Kings chapter 2. To set the context, Elijah had been a great prophet of Yahweh, the God of Israel. And as he neared the end of his ministry, he began to mentor Elisha to take his place. Elijah was mentoring Elisha. Now, later in life, Elisha also became a great prophet of God. But during our passage, he was still being mentored as Elijah’s time on earth was coming to an end. And during this passage, you will see Elisha walking through all five stages of grief.

2 Kings 2.

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 2 Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel.”

But Elisha said, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel.

Remember the first stage of grief? Denial.

Elijah tells Elisha, God is sending me to Bethel. If I’m not mistaken, “Bethel” means “house of God”. So, Elijah tells Elisha, God is sending me to God’s house. And Elisha says, oh no he’s not. I will make sure that doesn’t happen. I am not letting you out of my sight.

How many of us, when you heard that Pastor Kim was leaving thought, “oh no, she’s not”? How many of us took some action, maybe a conversation, maybe a phone call, maybe (as in my case) an email directly to her, to try to talk some sense into her? I was in the denial stage.

For a period of time, many of us have been in the denial stage. “on no”, “are you kidding?” “sure. Other senior pastors leave other churches, but not ours! Not our church!” “This can’t be happening!”

The story continues

3 The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, “Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” Elisha replied, “so be quiet.”

Somehow, I think this passage loses something in the translation. The prophets asked Elisha a question. “Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?”. All Elisha needed to say was “yes”. But, he says, “yes, I know” (emphatically). Another translation says “of course I know”. And then what about that second part, “so be quiet”. Was that necessary?

“Other translations read “keep silent”, “be still”, “let’s not talk about it”. I think he said the Hebrew equivalent of “shut up!”. Sometimes, when you are in the anger stage of grief, your anger doesn’t always hit the target of your anger.

Frequently, during the anger stage, we look to find a target for our anger. Perhaps, another word to use is blame. How many of us, since you heard about Pastor Kim’s departure, in an effort to answer the “why” question, found someone to blame?

Show of hands? And how helpful was that? Certainly, it wasn’t helpful at keeping Pastor Kim here. But, it might be helpful as we wrestle with our grief. What I would also like to point out is that misplaced anger, blaming the innocent, bad thoughts about others . . . we need to own that. Recognize where it is coming from. It is out of our own sense of hurt and loss. It will not bring back Pastor Kim. And, if not checked, it will sow division and discord within our body.

So, as frequently happens, these stages of grief do not proceed cleanly through from stage 1 to stage 5. Sometimes we need to repeat some stages. This is what happened with Elisha. He shows denial, then anger, then denial, then anger.

4 Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho.”

And he replied, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho.

5 The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, “Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” he replied, “so be quiet.”

So, they started at Gilgal, went to Bethel, and then to Jericho. When I looked at maps, I could find Bethel and I could find Jericho. But I found that Gilgal was in three locations, sometimes with a question

mark by it. So, my conclusion is that there is no real solid consensus as to where Gilgal was. But if you are playing at home, I'm guessing they have traveled about 40 miles that day.

And the scripture text doesn't say why God called Elijah to Bethel and to Jericho. It sounds like a wild goose chase. They are just walking around. And now there's another five miles to go.

6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan."

And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on.

7 Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. 8 Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

Now, there are lots of ways to cross a river. Elijah does it by taking his outer garment, rolling it up at striking the water. And the water divided, reminiscent of how God worked in Moses to cross the Red Sea.

So, throughout this text, it's been clear to just about everyone that God was going to take Elijah. And now, it's clear to absolutely everyone that God has shown up in a big way. And now they are separated from everyone else. And Elisha must confront the fact that it's going to happen.

So now, not only have they traveled about 45 miles that day, but now they are at the other side of the Jordan River in another country.

9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

10 "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."

Elisha can no longer live in denial. Anger doesn't help. And now he's into his bargaining phase. As long as this is going to happen, at least can I have this? Sometimes during our bargaining phase we use words like "at least" or "if only" or "well maybe". At least we had 11 good years. If only she would stay another year. Then we'll be ready for her to leave. Well maybe this group of consultants will fix everything up for us. "At least" or "if only" or "well maybe". How many of us have found ourselves playing that game with Pastor Kim's departure?

This is a natural part of the healing process, because it starts us thinking about possibilities for a path forward.

And then it happens. At some point, we simply must confront the enormity and the reality of the loss. The text says.

11 As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. 12 Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

Elisha must confront the departure of his spiritual leader and mentor and he enters into the stage of depression, where it seems for a while that he just cannot go on. Normally, in times like these, the advice might be to find a friend. But Elisha is now alone, on the other side of the Jordan. Just him . . . and God.

Let me skip ahead to the end of our passage because at the end of the story, we see Elisha fully in his stage of acceptance. In a lot of cases, Acceptance doesn't mean that everything will be happy. It means that we have figured out a way to go on in life, in spite of the loss that we have suffered. We have found a new normal.

See Elisha at the end of the story.

15 The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. 16 "Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley."

"No," Elisha replied, "do not send them."

17 But they persisted until he was too embarrassed to refuse. So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. 18 When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

Elisha has perfect acceptance at the end of the story. Something happened between depression and acceptance for Elisha. And let's see what it was. Let's look at those two missing verses.

Elisha is in the midst of his depression. He is physically tired from traveling all day. He is spiritually exhausted because this loss that he's been trying to prevent has now happened. His spiritual leader has been removed from him. It was God that did this to him. And he is isolated from his friends in a foreign country. And he has to figure out a way to get back across the Jordan River.

13 Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.

Something happens in these two verses that brings Elisha from his pit of depression to perfect acceptance. He puts God to the test and asks, "Where now is Yahweh, the God of Elijah?" And he struck the water with Elijah's cloak. And the waters divided.

What made the difference between depression and acceptance for Elisha was the realization the God was still there. God didn't leave him when Elijah left him. It wasn't only the God of Elijah. It was also the God of Elisha.

Some of us need to put God to the test. Not in an irresponsible way, like throwing ourselves off the top of the sanctuary to see if God sends his angels to catch us lest we strike our foot against a stone. But God's a big God and if our heart is right and we put him to the test in a way that shows that we are trying our hardest to seek after Him even in the midst of our despair, God can carry that burden.

But if you ask yourself, "Where now is Yahweh, the God of Israel?" and decide that he is still here . . . If you ask yourself, "Where now is Yahweh, the God of Elijah?" and decide that he is still here . . . If you ask yourself, "Where now is Yahweh, the God of Kim?" and decide that he is still here, then why would you want to go anyplace else?

We are putting God to the test. We are asking for him to show up for us . . . as he has in the past.

Psalm 34 says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him." Taste and see. Put God to the test. Another way of reading this text is "If you put God to the test, you will see that he is good. You will be blessed, if you put your hope in him."

Put God to the test and see that he is with us . . . still!

Let me close with this. Before I came to West Valley, I had spent quite a few years at First Pres Berkeley listening to a great expositor named Earl Palmer. I remember one Sunday, I think he was wrapping up his series on Revelation. And he had at the pulpit with him a blackboard. You know, one of those blackboards on wheels and the blackboard flips over. And on this blackboard, he drew a wavy line that went up and down, up and down as it moved from left to right.

And he said, this wavy line represents life. We know that life is turbulent. It's not a turbulent line going up. It's not a turbulent line going down. We don't know which direction it is going to go. We just know that it is turbulent.

And then he drew a cross on the left hand side, next to where the line began. And he said, one thing we know is that Christ was there at the beginning of time. "In the beginning was [Jesus] the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

And then, he walked to the right side of the board and he drew another cross at the point where the line ended. And he said, the second thing we know about life and all of its turbulence is that Jesus is there at

the end of time. That is the point of the book of Revelation. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

And then, he drew a cross on the wavy line. And he said, the third thing we know about this turbulent line is the Christ is with us every step of the way. "I will never leave you or forsake you"

Psalm 139 says, you hem me in behind and before and you have laid you hand upon me.

Brothers and sisters, we know that life is turbulent. We know that Jesus was there at the beginning of life. We know the Jesus will be there for us at the end of life. And we know that Jesus is walking with us and will continue to walk with us, as he has in the past, every step of the way.

Dear Jesus, these last few weeks have been full of denial, and anger, and bargaining, and depression as we try to accept what has happened. Thank you that you are still here, walking with us, every step of the way. In your name we pray, Amen.