# 1 Kings 19.15-16, 19-2129th June 2025

## Transition

Introduction to the Theme

In one of the churches where I used to serve, I was intrigued to read how they orchestrated a change of minister back in the final decade of the 19th century. Their incumbent minister was advanced in years so they suggested, gently I think, that he might like to take things a bit easier and they would appoint a younger minister to be his apprentice for three years and then take over on his retirement. And they were enabled to do this, the church history book said, by introducing pew rents. People could pay an annual fee and get a guaranteed seat! Those were the days. And this, they estimated, would bring in £250 per annum, more than enough in 1896 for a second minister’s stipend.

Well, I’ve been wary ever since of seeing Pew Rents on the elders’ agenda. Coded message, perhaps, that it would be time for me to go graciously!

This morning’s passage from the Jewish scriptures is one that describes the beginning of a transition. A change of national prophet from Elijah to Elisah.

It begs the question about all transitions about how the work and the message continues when the leadership changes. Does it continue? Can it continue?

Elisha wasn’t Elijah, he was different. Yet, I think today’s passage gives us a clue, hidden in the story, that the idea of serving God and serving others was going to stay front and centre of Elisha’s ministry, just as it had been central to his predecessor’s.

So, in a moment we’ll read a story from about 2,900 years ago about transition, seeking ancient wisdom for our journey today.

The Sermon

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word. So, in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen*.

Transition, in the British political system can be brutal. In The USA there’s months of preparation, in Westminster just days. When Harold MacMillan resigned as Prime Minister during the 60’s, from his hospital bed, that afternoon the GPO arrived in the ward to disconnect his scrambler telephone to the White House. He wrote in his memoirs that he felt it was all a little too fast and insensitive.

Elijah’s prophetic ministry is drawing to a close. He has been extraordinarily effective in speaking about God to the nation, yet it was sometimes at great personal cost and after his greatest moments he often experienced his lowest times, battling with self-doubt and depression.

So, Elisha comes into the frame, the next frame. He was to be appointed as a disciple of Elijah’s, that’s his apprenticeship route, leading one day to stepping into his mentor’s shoes. Today’s passage chronicles Elisha’s calling.

Just as Joshua followed Moses or Timothy might have succeeded Paul, so Elisha would be handed the baton by Elijah.

Transitions are inevitably worrying times because risk is a given whenever we take a step into the unknown future. We’ve all felt this the day before we began a new chapter in our lives, whether it’s getting married, starting a new job, moving house or having children. On those occasions it might have been easier to linger in a secure past, yet within us we felt called to take a risk and walk into an unknown future.

Issuing a call, receiving it, discerning it and responding to it, is rarely straightforward.

In today’s story Elisha receives God’s call in Elijah’s invitation to him to become his apprentice. And Elisha says ‘yes’. It was unsettling. It was an interruption. It seems to have come out of the blue. So, it was obviously a risky thing to do, yet he still says ‘yes’.

At a recent Ministers’ Meeting I was thrilled to learn of two examples of folk responding to the call of God. In terms of discipleship, we learnt that last year’s baptismal figures from the Baptist Union are the highest for many years. And in terms of a call to Ministry in the United Reformed Church, three people from our local synod are beginning their training this autumn.

All these folk have taken that risky first step and walked into the future because they felt God calling them.

2,900 years ago, God called Elisha. Hearing stories like these from that ministers’ meeting encourages us to believe that God still calls. God calls us to consider eldership, LunchBreak service, volunteering on the stewards’ rota, the Junior Church Team, the Pastoral Committee. Or maybe your call is to be part of your Resident’s Association, become a School Governor, work in the Hospice Shop or become a befriender at a bereavement group. Or perhaps your calling comes from doing your best and following your career path as a nurse, an accountant or a teacher

Now Elisha’s calling story has some dramatic elements, as many calling stories do in the Bible. They are presented as big moments and, at least two, symbolic acts form part of Elisha’s narrative.

We often use symbolism when words run out. The giving of a ring, the placing of a rose on a coffin, a handshake or hug in a moment of congratulation.

Well, today’s story begins like a silent movie from the 20’s, as there are no words, just action. The old prophet comes upon a busy field of ploughing. Elisha, son of Shaphat is there. There must have been so many people working the field that day because twelve pairs of oxen were being used, Elisha was with the last pair. And without a word seemingly spoken, at least not recorded, Elijah goes up to him and throws his cloak, his mantle upon him and Elisha appears to immediately grasp its symbolism and significance. He took it that this was a calling for him to become Elijah’s apprentice.

The second piece of symbolism is snuck in towards the end of the story at the farewell BBQ Elisha hosts for his family. As he prepares the meal he uses the wooden yokes as fuel for the cooking fire. It reads as if these were the very yokes he’d been using just a few verses back to control the oxen in the field. It’s as if he was saying, at least in symbolic actions if not in words, *I’m done with these tools of my former trade now. I won’t be needing them anymore. I’m moving on. From tonight, after this farewell meal, I’m a disciple of Elijah and a servant of The Lord.*
So, the yokes are burned in the fire as one chapter closes, and a new page is turned. Rather like the New Testament equivalent of the first disciples leaving their nets to go and follow Christ.

In all this talk of calling, especially when blended with the idea of a divine calling, we have to be careful to understand the nature of such invitations. They are clearly not a call to an easy life or, indeed, to an exalted one. Sometimes God even called the prophets with an upfront warning that their words would not be listened to. Yet still he called them.

God’s call is ultimately a call to serve.

Jesus called his disciples to follow him speaking of his own sense of calling as one who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life.

Today’s passage has this touching farewell meal at its close when Elisah lovingly prepares a meal for his family; as it were his final act of service to them.

Can you imagine that meal and sit a while with Elisah and his folks around the fire as the sun sets, the meat cooks, food is shared, and everyone knows what a profound moment it is. A last meal. A meal of love for a family in which Elisha has learnt how to serve. And now he will take that spirit of service and offer it to his mentor and to his God. A meal with the blessings of tears and smiles.

And then the chapter ends with the words: *he then followed Elijah and became his disciple.*

I just love another moment from history that has both an ending and beginning about it, this time from America, on February 11th, 1861, in Illinois. Abraham Lincoln is just about to board the special Presidential train that will take him to his Inauguration in Washington, and he gives, what has come to be referred to as, his Farewell Speech, to his family and friends. He speaks of *this place, and the kindness of these people, to whom I owe everything.* And at the end, before he boards the train he says: *Without the assistance of God, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.*I think this last meal of Elisha’s for his family was his way of saying to them what Lincoln said to the people of Springfield on that winter’s day in February 1861, that the God who goes with me, is the God who stays with you and will be everywhere for good.

Well, just three weeks ago we celebrated that very understanding of God on Pentecost Sunday. And this idea that God is not restricted to a particular time or place or person does give us hope and helps us to take that risk and the next step into the future.

On Easter Monday our Catholic friends lost their earthly leader and so that servant leadership began a process of passing from Francis to Leo. 2025, the year of two Popes.

God’s voice, presence, love and challenge did not fade or become silent on that Easter Monday.

It doesn’t end at the conclusion of a ministry in any local church.

In Lincoln’s words *God is everywhere for good.* So, to lock God up in just one ministry, one season of church history or one period in my own life is to believe in a God who is too small.

The God, who was with Elijah, stayed with Elisah. The God who inspired Paul motivated Timothy. The God who was with your parents, your Sunday School teacher, your youth group leader, is the God who is with you now. The God who moved events at AFC last year or forty years ago is the God who is with us today.

So Elisha leaves that family meal and takes a step into the future, a future of service, knowing God is with him. As Elisha took that step, so can we.

In the name of God who still calls us to follow him. Amen.
*Ian Green, Amersham, 124th June 2025*