

Gone Where?

By: Jonathan Townley

This summer, I've been working as a hospital chaplain, a step toward ordination in the pcusa. Last month, I was asked to visit a family who had gathered around their mother. She was dying.

"A nurse has asked for the grief packet," said a full-time chaplain. She showed me a stack of small blue pamphlets on a low shelf.

"This can be a pretty useful resource," I was told. I sat in the office and spread the pamphlet over my keyboard. As a new chaplain, I am sometimes anxious about hospital visits, especially situations where emotions may be high. I did not know what to expect or what advice I could possibly give to grieving middle aged folks who have experienced more life than me. So, instead of heading straight to the elevator, I sat and read the grief packet.

Truly, it was more of a death packet. It described the bodily process of death from a care givers perspective. It was concise and informative, but also beautiful, poetic. On the last page was a poem by Henry Van Dyke called *Gone From My Sight*. Here is an excerpt from that poem:

Gone From My Sight

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship, at my side,
spreads her white sails to the moving breeze and starts
for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength.
I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck
of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.
Then, someone at my side says, "There, she is gone."

Gone where?

When both my Grandfathers got sick, every holiday began to take on new meaning. I remember thinking to myself each time we got together that this year might be his last Christmas, Easter, or Halloween. Smaller holidays began to mean more to me. At 14, Valentines day had never meant much but suddenly through creating a card for my Grandpa Flemming who I loved, who I had limited time to express that love to, Valentines day began to mean a great deal. His Birthday, too, meant much. We would go to fair and eat Elephant ears until we were licking cinnamon sugar from our fingers. With my Grandpa Townley it was the Fourth of July, not for any particularly patriotic reason but because on that day he liked to drink root beer floats. His own grandfather had done that with him on the fourth of July. He never forgot it. And I loved him and so on Fourth of July we drank root beer floats down to the last foam in the cup, bloated stomach.

The last year he lived in his home I remember him drinking his root beer float like water. He was done before we had finished half. "Do you want another float?" my Grandma asked him teasing, sarcastic. "Yes" he said in complete seriousness. And we gave him one. The next year he was in memory care and we brought him rootbeer float flavored popsicles from aldi. He ate at least two. In a time when he struggled to communicate with us, we still had rootbeer floats. We held the sweetness of that tradition.

I imagine many of you have felt this way, when someone you love begins to die. You keep your eyes on the sail of their ship. You watch them as long as you are able in this world, holding on every glimpse until they are gone. Gone where?

I love Henry Van Dyke's poem and I also think his metaphor misses something. When someone you love is dying you aren't just watching them go from a distance, you're right there, you're moving with them. When you're able, you're taking each and every chance to lick cinnamon sugar from your fingers to pour another float. I think that today's scripture tells this story in its own way.

Elijah is one of the most significant figures in the Torah. Through violent political struggle, he maintains the covenant and keeps Adoni, also known as YAWEH, at the center of the Hebrew people's religion. He performs miracles and foretells deaths and orchestrates coups. At times he acts like Robin Hood, stealing land back from royalty and redistributing it to farmers. At other times, his ministry involves organizing rebels in holy war. The prophets of his story bear more similarity to warriors than fortunetellers. But perhaps Elijah is most significant in the Torah because besides Moses, Elijah is the only person to speak to God at Mount Horeb. Struggling with his revolution, Elijah runs into the wilderness and travels all the way back to the holy mountain where Moses was given the covenant. There we have these verses from 1 Kings 19, one of the most striking characterizations of God in the Hebrew Bible.

¹¹ He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake, ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

As a man who spent his life killing and destroying, Elijah did not know God made a home in the quiet, still spaces.

Here on Mount Horeb, God tells Elijah to pick Elisha as his successor. Elisha comes from a landowning family, but he drops everything, his wealth and status and future as soon as Elijah asks him to follow. Elisha serves as a sidekick of sorts to the superhero Elijah as he dethrones King Ahab and sets up a new ruler in his place. The two become close, very close. We don't necessarily see this happen except in today's scripture, when Elijah is going to travel away from Elisha, Elisha refuses saying, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." What a line. It seems Elisha knows already that the end of their time together is near. But he leans into it. He seeks to experience all the living Elijah has left. And when the prophets approach and tell Elisha, "You know the lord is going to take Elijah from you today," he says, "Yes, I know, so be quiet." And again, these same lines of dialogue are repeated. Elijah is called away and Elisha refuses to leave him saying, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." And again the prophets approach and say, "The lord is taking Elijah from you." "Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet." A contradictory response from Elisha. If he knows that Elijah is to be taken by the lord why is he telling everyone to stop talking about it? Perhaps because he knows but he cannot accept it. He cannot imagine what his life will be like without Elijah. He cannot imagine what it will mean for Elijah to be taken from him.

And finally, one more time, Elijah is called away to the Jordan River and Elisha says "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." Elisha refuses to watch Elijah go. He refuses to stand on the shore and watch the ship cross the horizon. What Elisha shows us is another metaphor about death about loving someone who is dying.

And Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him in the time they have left together. “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” says Elisha. But he doesn’t say your Spirit, not like we would say spirit. In Hebrew, he says *buruachka* your *ruah*. *Ruah* means spirit or it means wind. In the creation story it is God’s *ruah* that sweeps over the watery darkness alone before the world is made. *Ruah* is God’s wind, energy, spirit that starts creation. So, when Elisha is saying to Elijah “give me a double portion of your spirit,” he is also saying, *let the very wind of God that lives in you, continue to live on in me.*

And the two walk together along the road and talk. And we don’t get to know what they are saying to one another. This moment is too personal. This moment is too tied up in what it means to love someone who is dying and refusing to watch them from the shore. To love someone who is dying is to travel with them. To share the road. To share all the holidays even the little ones, to make new meaning and to remember old meaning, to lick cinnamon sugar from your fingers, and to refill root beer floats.

There is an old black spiritual that we all know well. It’s sung often at funerals. It’s sung often at death beds. “Swing low, sweet chariot Comin for to carry me home.”

And suddenly, the chariots arrive. Elijah travels somewhere where Elisha cannot follow. Suddenly Elijah is gone.

I’ve been learning about grief this summer. Sigmund Freud once tried to describe grief scientifically. He said that grief is the process by which someone separates themselves from the “object of their love.” His definition was immediately controversial. Not only is Freud referring to loved ones as “objects,” but to him the end goal, the accomplishment at the end of grief, is to be fully separate from the person you loved and to accept that separation. That doesn’t sound very useful.

In the 1960s Elisabeth Kubler-Ross sat down and tried to describe grief again with the now famous five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Kubler-Ross saw these steps like a set of stairs. One would start off on denial and take every step before finally reaching acceptance, having processed her grief fully and arriving at acceptance. In this way, her theory very much mirrored Freud. The goal at the end of grief was to accept that one is now separate from the person who has died.

In the 90s, less famous scientist did cross cultural research where they looked at grieving traditions from cultures all around the world. They found that grief didn't travel in a straight line of steps from denial to acceptance. Instead, denial was simply a natural feeling that allowed people to rest from heavy sadness. And the end goal of grief wasn't separation or acceptance. Researchers found that most cultures instead held a firm belief in a continued relationship with one's beloved, after their death. They found acceptance and separation were relatively recent ideas of grief in western culture tied to values of productivity. If one accepts grief they can be less emotional. They can work harder.

These values of separation and acceptance are far from Elisha's values when he says "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit." When he says let the very wind of God that lives in you continue to live on in me.

As Elisha travels on, he is filled with the superhuman power which Elijah possessed. He is able to part the water. And he is now able to perform miracles in his ministry. They are less violent than Elijah's. He feeds hungry people. He retrieves lost tools. As he continues on the path he is changed by the spirit of Elijah.

I invite you to allow yourself to experience grief in this way. What if you didn't have to accept your sadness and move on. Sometimes we think about grief as something inside us that

shrinks away until it is gone. But what if grief is there within us ,even now, even still. What if we don't have to shrink grief away? Instead, we just have to let ourselves grow, expand, to provide room for our full selves and the grief which we carry.

I don't think any of us can separate ourselves from the spirits of those we have lost. We have all lost someone who changed us deeply. And though they are physically gone, the way we carry ourselves in the world is shaped by those who have loved us. The relationship continues even beyond death. The people you love were in turn shaped by others who loved them and those people shaped by older spiritual inheritance. Think a minute on the generations of loving and striving that shaped you. Think of all their hopes working still within you.

Last month, when I arrived in that room where the woman was dying and her family was all around, I offered up the little blue grief pamphlet with the description of death and the poem about the boat.

"No," said her daughter. "We don't need that" She was like Elisha in that moment. It was as if I came in like the prophets asking "do you know the lord will take your mother today?"

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet."

"Okay," I said. And I asked about her mother. And there were tears and there was a lot of laughter and there she was her holding her mother's hand and showing pictures and telling old stories and recent ones and prayer and sheer silence—and there was, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you."

Gone? Gone where? Amen.

Most of all, when I die I know that youll be by my side youll be there to see me on my way. And most of all, when I die, I know that youll be by my side, even if youre somehow far away.

Elijah Taken Up to Heaven

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.

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."

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."

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.

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."

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.

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.

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?"