

Sunday, June 30, 2013: 2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14; 1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21; Luke 9:51-62

by [A. Katherine Grieb](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue

“I have decided to follow Jesus.” These words begin a well-known hymn, but for me they will always be about Gordon and Mary Cosby, cofounders of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C. Gordon’s death on March 20, 2013, was not unexpected. He was 95 and had become frail. Knowing that he was dying, Gordon used the time to comfort coworkers, friends and neighbors. He said that dying was the next great adventure and he was ready for it.

Gordon decided to follow Jesus over and over again every day. Because of that decision, many people were able to articulate their own calls better after visiting with him. Many others found ways to live their vocations in the ministries of COS. Their newsletter *Callings* published an issue that listed 37 ministries that have grown from COS mission groups. They have names like Jubilee Jobs, Samaritan Inns, the Potter’s House, Joseph’s House, Sarah’s Circle, Manna, Inc., Dayspring Retreat Center, Sign of Jonah. What do you suppose they were reading in that church?

After the wind, earthquake, fire and the sound of silence on Mount Horeb, Elijah stood at the mouth of the cave to listen for the voice of the Lord God of Hosts. To say that he had experienced prophetic burnout would be putting it mildly. God commanded him, “And you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.”

Elijah set out to find Elisha, who was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen, a substantial financial investment. Elijah “anointed” him symbolically by throwing his mantle over Elisha. Elisha clearly recognized both the significance of the call and his own inability to refuse it: he left the oxen and ran after Elijah, then asked if he could take leave of his parents. “Then I will follow you.” But Elijah’s response challenged him to count the cost of discipleship and make a clean break with anything that would prevent his undivided attention. We are not told about Elisha’s thought processes, only that he slaughtered the oxen, built a fire with the wood of their yokes, gave their roasted flesh to the people and followed Elijah.

In the first chapter of 2 Kings, Elijah called down fire from heaven to destroy his enemies. In the second chapter (our reading), Elijah ascended into heaven in a whirlwind of chariots and horses of fire. As he and his successor stood by the Jordan River, Elijah parted the waters (like Moses and Joshua before him) with his mantle, and the two men crossed to the other side. Their final conversation was brief: Elijah offered a last gift to Elisha; Elisha asked for a double share of Elijah’s spirit. Since Mosaic law provided a double share of an inheritance to the firstborn son (Deut. 21:15–17), Elisha was consenting to accept both Elijah’s prophetic powers and the hardships that accompanied them as if he were Elijah’s biological son. The prophet predicted that Elisha would know God had granted his request if Elisha saw Elijah being taken up. Then Luke makes us wait with Elisha until we see Elijah ascend in the whirlwind to heaven. Retrieving Elijah’s mantle, Elisha used it to part the Jordan’s waters once more and returned to the other side.

There is little doubt that Luke had this story in mind as he narrated the beginning of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Luke’s first words (“When the days drew near for him to be taken up . . .”) show us that Elijah typology is in view. He also borrowed from Isaiah (50:7) and Ezekiel (21:1–2) to express the complex dialectical relationship between Jesus and the city that killed the prophets (Luke 13:34). That Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” suggests both his determination to fulfill his prophetic destiny in obedience to God and also his judgment upon the city that did not know the things that made for peace (19:41). Yet Jerusalem was also the city that Jesus

loved: he longed to gather her children as a hen gathers her chicks, but the city was unwilling (13:34).

Surely the words that Jesus spoke concerning John the Baptizer (a prophet and more than a prophet, Luke 7:26) apply even more accurately to Jesus himself. In our lesson, Luke teaches us the character of Jesus' prophetic ministry by comparing and contrasting him to Elijah. When James and John suggested calling down fire to consume a village that refused to offer hospitality to Jesus, Jesus rebuked them and found another village—in clear contrast to Elijah's actions. Similarly, when Jesus was “negotiating” the cost of discipleship with three potential followers, Elijah's call of Elisha was clearly in view. To the one who asked permission to bury his father, just as Joseph had sought Pharaoh's leave to bury his father (Gen. 50:4–6), Jesus' response was harsh: the dead can bury their own dead; you proclaim God's reign! When another asked what Elisha had asked of Elijah, to bid farewell to those at home, Jesus replied: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for God's reign,” a clear allusion to the earlier story.

While Jesus was considerably gentler with those who opposed his ministry than Elijah was (no fire from heaven), he was more demanding than Elijah toward the disciples. Gordon Cosby sometimes said that he was afraid to enter his prayer closet for fear that God would command him to do one more apparently impossible thing. But he went, listened and obeyed, and the “impossible thing” became the next ministry of the Church of the Saviour.