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“You have asked something that is not easy” (2 Kings 2:1, 6-14).

2 Kgs 2:1, 6-14; Matt

The departure of the Prophet Elijah in a fiery chariot and the commissioning of his successor Elisha is another cinematic Bible story that has left its mark on the world's imagination and language. From it we get the image of handing on the “mantle” of power, and a “double portion” of spirit.

Both prophets have amazing gifts and direct access to God's Spirit, which enables them to control the weather, raise the dead, confront kings and summon down fire from heaven. Elijah calls Elisha from his plow and invests him his own authority. As he departs, Elisha is not shy about asking for a double portion of his spirit, which Elijah warns is not easy to grant or to use, as all power proves to be. He conditions the transfer of his cloak and spirit on whether God allows Elisha to see his ascension into the clouds.

The Gospel writers are quick to find parallels in Jesus, his healing gifts and power to raise the dead, and at his Ascension into heaven. The disciples who “see” (believe)

him ascend then receive his Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a transfer of power that is much greater than the double portion to Elisha, appearing as tongues of fire on each disciple and on all who are baptized, including us.

But Jesus' prophetic ministry is different than the shock and awe of earlier heroes like Moses and the prophets. Jesus is God's Incarnate Word, yet his divine power is hidden in his humanity. Jesus is one of us, and he seems intent on showing us how grace does not need spectacle to achieve its transformative effects in our human relationships and in ordinary ways.

Today's Gospel, the same one used for Ash Wednesday, tells us to do everything in secret. Jesus' parables are about God's Kingdom coming like seeds sown in the soil, yeast hidden in flour, salt in food. He orders those he heals not to tell everyone what their own faith made happen. He flees the attention miracle seekers who think God only works in signs and wonders.

Jesus tells his disciples that they, too, will work even greater signs. His mission is not about miracles but about the miracle of life itself, what love and reconciliation can do within relationships, how courage can change the world little by little, generation by generation, if people believe God has given them this power. Jesus did not come to promote shrines and churches as the only places to find God or where lighting candles will merit miracles and win special favors. The Incarnation makes all of creation sacred, filled with grace and holy possibility because in Jesus God is everywhere, and heaven has come to earth to give us the confidence that love can accomplish all things.

When Elijah tells Elisha he has asked for something difficult, he might have been speaking to us about just how powerful we are and the dangers of using our gifts for ourselves instead of others. Discipleship gives us the discipline to be shy lovers, discerning miracle workers, silent servants and wise stewards of the gifts the Spirit. Rejoice in what you have received, and if you think you can handle it, ask for seconds or even a double portion. But, as e. e. cummings says, "be of love a little more careful than anything."

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