

LOOKING AHEAD

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

June 29, 2025

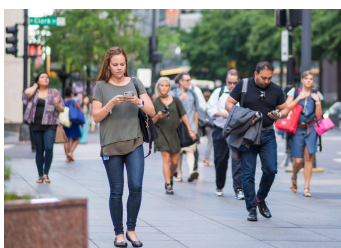
Pentecost 3

2nd Kings 2:6-9

Then Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here. [Adonai] is sending me to the Jordan.” “As [Adonai] lives and as you live,” said Elisha, “I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on. Fifty disciples of prophets stood off at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha stopped at the Jordan. 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 land. Once across, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” Elisha replied, “Let me inherit two-thirds of your spirit,” he said.

Luke 9:57-62

As they were making their way along, they met a fellow traveler who said to Jesus, “I’ll follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have lairs, the birds of the sky have nests, but the Chosen One has nowhere to rest.” To another traveler Jesus said, “Follow me.” The traveler replied, “Let me bury my father first.” Jesus said in return, “Let the dead bury their dead; you go and proclaim the reign of God everywhere.” Yet another traveler approached Jesus in this way: “I’ll be your follower, Rabbi, but first let me say goodbye to my people at home.” Jesus answered, “Whoever puts a hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the reign of God.”



(prayer)

Over the last half-dozen years or so, three of my adult children have completed their planned post-secondary education

- The fourth is well on their way
- Proud papa!

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Not every foray into the post-secondary education world has to be tied directly to some future career or job path

- I am a big fan of learning for learning’s sake
- Stretching the heart and mind will have benefits far beyond a particular subject matter

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The practice of learning and gaining skills in critical thinking

- always pays off down the road

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So far, two of my three graduate children are now working full-time in their chosen fields

- The third graduate only got their degree ten days ago, so in fairness,
- it is a little early to judge how quickly they might be earning a living in their field
 - which by its nature will be made up a series of short term jobs rather than one full-time one
- but... they do have their first industry "job" lined up for the fall
 - and is working hard getting known in the field

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There is value in keeping focus on the path that lies ahead

- that is made possible because of where we've been.

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Elisha's response at hearing that Elijah planned on going ahead alone...

- was to echo Ruth's words to her mother-in-law in the old story
 - *wherever you may go, I will follow*

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Elijah was a prophet of the 9th century BCE

- He was a thorn in the side of King Ahab of the northern Hebrew kingdom of Israel (about 100 years after the nation divided following the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon)
- Ahab had built a temple to the canaanite god, Ba'al
 - Elijah (literally *my God is Yah*) may actually have been a title for the prophet before it became a name
 - symbolizing his challenge to worship of Ba'al

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One time, while in a cave on Mount Horeb (the same mountain where Moses received the ten commandments)

- God appeared to the prophet
 - not as a mighty wind, nor an earthquake and not as fire,
 - but as a still, small voice,
 - which told Elijah (among other things) to anoint Elisha as his successor.

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Aside: how to remember who came first

- think alphabetic
- Elijah comes before Elisha

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On his way from Horeb to Damascus,

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- Elijah found Elisha ploughing with twelve yokes of oxen.
 - That's some serious plowing!
- Elijah went over to Elisha, and threw his mantle over his shoulders - as a sign of this new prophetic endeavour

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As we heard today, near the end of their time together

- Elijah uses that same outer coat to create a dry path to cross the Jordan River
 - another obvious Moses reference

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If we had read a bit further into the Second Kings passage, we would have heard

- that (as Elisha watches Elijah ascend into heaven on a chariot of fire) the old prophet let go of his mantle
 - which Elisha picked up before venturing forward on his own
 - confident that he, indeed, *was* the rightful heir of Elijah's ministry among the group of fifty plus disciples of Elijah
- As we heard... that had been Elisha's request to Elijah... to be treated like an oldest son
 - who typically inherited a *double portion* compared to the second in line
 - i.e. the oldest son got 2/3s of the estate; and the second son got 1/3

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Right after the chariot of fire disappeared from view,

- Elisha used Elijah's mantle to help him cross back over the Jordan
 - the new, new Moses
- and he went right to the work of speaking words of God to the kings of Israel

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In our other reading, Jesus also promotes a *looking ahead* style of mission

- Actually, on the surface Jesus sounds pretty harsh
- *I will be a committed follower tomorrow, so why can't I attend my father's funeral today?*

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Jesus appears even stricter than Elijah.

- who let Elisha prepare a goodbye feast with his family (which Elijah attended)...
 - using the meat of his (now unneeded) oxen cooked on a fire fueled by the wood from the (now unneeded) plow and yokes

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I lament that Jesus' desire for a forward looking ministry has been abused by

- charismatics like Jim Jones and David Koresh
- who exploited the implication that you must leave your family to follow

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We know that Jesus ***did not*** restrict his followers from maintaining family connections while being disciples

- Jesus even (famously) stayed at Peter's mother-in-law's place

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- even after Peter was invited to leave his nets and come fish for people

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But Jesus wanted potential followers to understand up front that life with Jesus would be a life on the road

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James, Peter, and John have recently had their mountain-top experience of a transfigured, dazzling bright Jesus appearing with Moses and Elijah

- they instinctively knew that things were getting mysterious and serious

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So when new people expressed an interest in coming along

- Jesus (I think out of compassion) wanted them to know what they were getting into
 - *You know, we'll be travelling constantly*
 - *We'll be doing a lot of sleeping outside or on borrowed floors*
 - *I can't saw when we might be back near your village*
 - *It could be a really long time*
 - *Being homesick is something you'll just have to endure*
 - *you will miss major family events*
 - *you will not be back to help with the harvest*
 - *Are you prepared to commit to that life?*

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Life with Jesus would involve being committed to moving forward

- you can't see the path ahead if you're always looking back

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Yes, it is always wise to apply our lessons of the past as we venture forward

- Learning from the past is very different from living in the past

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June 2025 has (unofficially) been the United Church of Canada's 100th Anniversary month

- we were formed on June 10th, 1925 based on very forward ideals espoused by three Canadian Christian denominations
- willing to set aside their past way of being church to be part of something new

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I have enjoyed the opportunities to reminisce - *a 100th Anniversary does warrant a bit of looking back*

- but... I am less interested in the old stories
 - than the ones we are writing now

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In the Philippians letter (3:13-14), the Apostle Paul shared one of his mantras for living

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- Here is one thing I do: I forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead.
- I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus

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The image of “forgetting what lies behind” isn’t about erasing memory or dishonoring the past

- it’s about refusing to let old fears, regrets, or triumphs paralyze our journey into the future.

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The gospel of Jesus isn’t a religious nostalgia trip;

- it’s a liberation manifesto.

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Not looking back can mean

- releasing ourselves of burdens from the unresolved past;
- and resisting the lingering worry that our worst moment defines us.

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But it also can mean

- to not rest on our the legacy of our best moments

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The 1925 founders of the UCCan did not know exactly how this new church experience would evolve

- each new generation took on the task of moving us forward

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I had an all day General Council meeting yesterday

- based on the business we discussed
- we are definitely still looking forward

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In a smaller (but similar way) those of you who were involved in the (eventual) creation of this Spirit of Hope community of faith

- did your best to imagine how things could turn out
 - a decentralized, permission-giving governance structure was created
 - after lots of dreaming, words for expressing mission and vision were decided upon
 - which already amended as we became a formal Affirming Ministry

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Then came the hardest part for anyone who has tried to birth a new way of being

- the idea and theory stages had to give way to the learning by living stages

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I wasn't here at the time, but even in my five-and-a-half years with you

- I know that not everything has always gone according to plan

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But my observation is that we’ve been brave enough to adjust to emerging circumstances

- a few original theories had to be re-thought here and there

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And we are constantly being reminded that we are a work-in-progress

- when we act inconsistently
- when we lose focus
- when worry about what the world might think about us... especially when it is focused on a tiny part of who we are

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We will do well to remember that we are part of a movement founded on a teacher who was always ready

- to move on to the next adventure
- to meet new challenges and
- face new opportunities

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Like Elisha, we are invited to embrace a prophetic hope and faith

- Elisha did not seek to repeat the deeds of Elijah,
- but to move down the path that emerged in his time

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Prophetic hope and faith doesn't live in the memory lane of *God did great things back then*

- it lives in what the Spirit is doing now,
- and will do tomorrow.

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Looking forward is not forgetting what got us here

- we hold each other's histories with empathy
- naming struggle without clinging to it

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In that way, we clear the path for shared mission and ministry

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We can imagine and even plan for how and who we will be down the road

- but there is only one way to know for sure...
- To move ahead and discover as we go

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// last line //

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The good news is (the great news is)...

- **that we are not alone along this Way.**

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Thanks be to God!

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Let us pray:

God of every time and place, thank you for being our companion. We will move forward by

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fixing our hope on the horizon of your boundless love. Amen

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#356VU Seek Ye First

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