

Sometimes I can't figure out the readings in the lectionary.

Why do they leave in what they leave in, and leave out what they leave out?

Our first reading today is missing three verses right in the middle.

I wonder why someone thought the reading needed to be three verses shorter?

Since I always wonder about the stuff that's left out,

I went back and read the whole reading.

Earlier today, we heard the first two verses:

¹ *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.

Now come the missing verses:

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, "but do not speak of it."

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, "but do not speak of it."

And now the story picks up where we heard it earlier:

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.

And ... the prophets wait on one side of the river,

Elijah and Elisha head over to the other side,

the chariot of fire shows up,

and Elijah is carried up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Those "left out verses" are interesting to me for several reasons.

The first, is that at each stop, Elijah gives Elisha the chance to remain behind,

to not have to be there at the moment that he leaves.

Leaving is hard – watching someone leave is even harder.

For the one who is leaving is going on to something new,

while the one who is left behind stays in the familiar setting,

but without the person who helped that setting to make sense.

Yet Elisha chooses to stay with his
beloved teacher and mentor for as long as he can.
Each time Elijah tells him to stay, Elisha says he will not leave him,
and they walk on together to the next place in the journey.

A second thing we learn from the missing verses
is that all of the prophets
know that today is the day that Elijah is going to the Lord.
And at each stop, they rush out to tell Elisha what they know.

I wonder why they did that?
Were they trying to help him come to terms with it?
Or did they just want to be the first to share the bad news?
Were they gloating just a bit, “Hey Elisha, you’re hot stuff now,
but after Elijah leaves, you won’t be so special anymore –
and by the way, today’s the day.”
Each time he hears this, Elisha says that he also knows that today’s the day,
and he does not want to talk about it.
Sometimes, talking about something makes it even more real.
So Elisha holds on to the last few hours, the last few minutes.
One last time he visits the various groups of prophets with his beloved master.
One last time, he sees Elijah do something miraculous – this time,
parting the waters of the River Jordan so they can cross on dry land.
He takes note of each step in the journey,
listens to Elijah’s breathing and the sound of his feet on the path,
tries to memorize the sensation of having his beloved teacher
at his side one last time.

And then the time comes for the final goodbye.
Elijah turns to him and says,
“Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.”
Elijah knows that his leaving will be hard for his student.
So he asks, “What can I give you to remember me by?
How can I make my leaving easier for you?
What do you want to hold onto when you can no longer hold on to me?”

We do that too, don’t we?
We want a memento of the one we love.
We want something that was once theirs
that we can see and hold and touch when we
can no longer see, hold, or touch the one we love.

But Elisha doesn’t ask for a memento.
No, Elisha’s answer is that he wants a double share of Elijah’s spirit.

Now he's not saying that he wants to be twice as great as Elijah.
Rather, he's saying that he wants to be Elijah's heir –
his spiritual "eldest son."

In those days, a man's sons would inherit his property when he died.

The property would be divided into one more part than the man had sons,
so if he had three sons, his property would be divided into four parts,
if he had 2 sons, three parts, etc.

Then the eldest son, the heir, would get two portions,
while all of the rest would get one.

Elisha knows that he will have to carry on the work after Elijah leaves.

Perhaps he's thinking about all of those snarky prophets
standing over on the safe side of the river.

As Elijah's successor and heir,

he is asking that Elijah leave him with the tools
that he'll need to do the work well.

Of course, Elijah cannot grant his wish.

But he does tell him that if Elisha can actually watch Elijah leave,
then God will have granted his request.

For only the one who has been chosen by God to be his heir will be able to
see what's happening at the time when God opens the heavens.

And of course, Elisha does see the fiery chariot and horses,
and he does see Elijah carried off in a whirlwind up to heaven.

And then?

After that moment of seeing beyond the earthly realm,
Elisha is left alone – at the edge of the river –
with Elijah's discarded mantle at his feet.

I imagine that his hands tremble as he picks it up.

I see him walking slowly back to the river, standing for a moment,
and then with all of those prophets looking on,

(perhaps waiting for him to fail)

Elisha strikes the water as he'd seen Elijah do and cries out,
"Where is the God of Elijah?"

And the waters part.

He goes from the last place where he was with Elijah,
and walks into familiar territory in a new and unfamiliar way,

He goes on to become the prophet that God has called him to be.

Elisha now wears the mantle that had been Elijah's,
however, his ministry was quite different from that
of his fiery mentor.

Elijah had called down fire on false prophets,

and had prophesied doom to a weak and evil king.
In the next few weeks, we will hear stories of Elisha healing, reconciling,
preaching God's word in new and different contexts.
He may have worn Elijah's mantle, but Elisha had his own ministry.

What mantle do we pick up today, we Elisha's,
as we say farewell to this journey we've walked together?
For now, even without the chariot of fire or the whirlwind,
we know it is time for us to turn from the mantle of our "together-ministry"
and take up the mantle of the new ministry God has planned for us.
We have served together in this community for three years.
We have prayed together, laughed together, celebrated together,
eaten together, sung together, cried together, learned together.
We have tried new things together.
Some of them have succeeded beyond our wildest hopes,
while others have faded quietly into history.
We have had fruitful and sometimes painful conversations.
We have studied scripture together,
and we have come together to worship and to be fed at this holy table.
Over the past three years, you
have trained me and formed my ministry in very powerful ways.
Because of this community, I am a better person,
and will be better able to serve a new community as their priest.
Although I do not yet know where I am going,
I know that God is leading the way
and will use me in new and exciting ways.

So what mantle will the St. Mary Anne's community put on now?
To what new and exciting work is God calling you?
I hope that you will continue to raise up and train leaders for the church –
you do that work very well.
I know that you will continue to be a welcoming place for children,
and a place where people of all ages
can come to ask and answer deep questions.
But I wonder what other ministries God will call you to in the
weeks, months and years ahead?
I look forward to hearing the stories of where God leads you next.

It is hard to leave, and so I take these moments
to look at your faces, to hear your voices,
and to remember the journey we have taken together.
Know that as I put on my new ministry, that there will be times when
I hold onto the strength of what we have been to and for each other.
For in darker days, it will be good to remove the mantle from my shoulders,

strike the waters separating me from God's work,
and cry out in an echo of Elisha's voice,
"Where is the Lord, the God of the SMA community?"
And I know that God will part the waters for me,
because I know you will be holding me in your hearts and in your prayers.
Know that you can count on me to do the same.
As I step from this pulpit for the last time (at least for awhile)
I leave you with the words of my favorite Franciscan blessing.

"May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers,
half truths, and superficial relationships so that we
may love from deep within our hearts.
May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people
so that we may continue to work for justice, freedom and peace.
May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection,
hunger and war so that we may reach out to comfort them
and help to turn their pain into joy.
And may God bless us with enough foolishness
to believe that we can make a difference in the world
so that we can do what others claim cannot be done"
[and help to heal God's broken, hurting, and beautiful world."]

And let the people say, "Amen."