

## Tagalong

2 KINGS 2:1-16 (NRSV) *Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. <sup>2</sup>Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. <sup>3</sup>The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." <sup>4</sup>Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. <sup>5</sup>The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." <sup>6</sup>Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. <sup>7</sup>Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. <sup>8</sup>Then*

*Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. <sup>9</sup>When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." <sup>10</sup>He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." <sup>11</sup>As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. <sup>12</sup>Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. <sup>13</sup>He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. <sup>14</sup>He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.*

If I were doing a movie of Elijah's life, I'd cast Christopher Loy in that role. You know Christopher Loy? The absent-minded scientist in "Back to the Future?" Elijah was... well, weird; but one of my favorite biblical characters.

Elisha is no less fascinating. A few days after this story, Elisha heads for Bethel, and some small boys come after him shouting, "Go up, Baldy! Go up, Baldy!" My uncle was as bald as a billiard ball, and said the good Lord made all kinds of heads, and the ones that embarrassed him he covered with hair. But, Elisha turns and curses the boys in the name of the Lord and two she-bears come out of the woods and maul 42 of the boys. I'm sure the Lord was proud of Elisha that day.

A part of this text may escape us in a casual reading; but, I think is important. At each stop along the journey, "the company of prophets" came out to meet them. These were disciples of Elijah, and Elisha was chosen out of their community to be Elijah's successor. Jewish prophets always had disciples. Some of the earliest bands of prophets followed their master from place-to-place. Later, during the reigns of David and Solomon, we begin to see settled prophetic communities, like monasteries, where the disciples lived and learned the prophet's teachings and

wrote them down. Some of the most ancient scrolls we have today came from those prophetic schools, the most well-known of which probably is the Qumran community, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947—the writings of Isaiah. Apparently, Elijah had several such communities—in Gilgal, in Bethel, in Jericho.

So, these ancient Hebrew prophets were not just solitary figures who popped up with messages from the Lord. They were teachers. Some were members of the king's court—royal advisors—like Isaiah. Others were a royal pain—confronting corruption, and injustice, and abuses of power—like Elijah.

And for the most part they were the foundation of Israel's spiritual life—such as it was. Oh, there were the priests; but their function was more liturgical than spiritual. The spirituality of Judaism came through the prophets. It is thought by some credible scholars that Jesus spent time at Qumran.

Spiritual formation is often understood today in individualistic terms; so, it's easy to forget the important role a faith community plays in our growth as individuals. When we look at these prophetic communities, we're reminded of the value of spiritual community as a venue for growth.

And in the character of Elisha we see the importance of spiritual mentors. Most of us can name someone—maybe several “someones”—who influenced our spiritual growth. Elisha followed Elijah like a puppy—a tagalong—refusing to let Elijah out of his sight. Maybe you were a tagalong, persistent in following some important person in your spiritual growth.

Sometimes we tag along like a puppy. At other times we're dragged along by the scruff of our neck. My favorite blogger writes (and I've edited it to fit my time allotment):<sup>1</sup>

“I was 23 years old, sitting alone in an apartment in Lexington, KY, having just moved 7 hours north from my beloved Georgia. It was my first on my own, and so far from home. The next week I would begin work on a Master of Divinity degree and begin work as Student Associate for Youth Ministry at a church in Bardstown, KY. I was trying to ignore the fear by reading a book I was supposed to finish before class started the next week. It wasn't working.

“There was knock on the door. I opened it, and there stood a very tall, very smiling, very eager fellow student I'd seen in passing earlier in the day. “Hey! I'm Joby,” he said, “and some of us are going down to get a drink at Charlie Brown's and thought you might want to go.”

“I made some mumbling excuse. I was grumpy, afraid, and also unshowered. I had no desire to be “social.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://someonestolemycoffee.com/2019/06/19/by-the-scruff-of-the-neck-on-being-pulled-along/>

"But Joby insisted. Maybe he saw how much I needed encouragement. Maybe it was just his way. But the next thing I knew, he'd taken the book from my hands, walked back to the bathroom, turned on the shower, and hollered at me as he left: "Clean up! And meet us downstairs in a half hour!"

"Too stunned to argue, I did as I was told. And by the time I got home that night I had both new friends and a new favorite place to be. Charlie Brown's was cozy, bookshelf-lined, with couches and friendly bartenders. I can't begin to guess how many afternoons and evenings I spent there over the next few years.

*"Have you ever been dragged along by someone who cared enough to grab you by the scruff of the neck, and insist that you make some movement, because you're so mired down by the muck of life that even thinking about moving is exhausting?"*

*"Ever been pulled through a situation you weren't quite sure how to navigate? Had a hand to hold as you moved through a new relationship or a new job? Or a crisis? Or a traumatic event? Or just a really, really bad day?"*

*"Ever been keep afloat by the strength of those around you—those who refused to let you fall, even as it felt like maybe the floor beneath you would give way, and you couldn't imagine how you'd rise above the wreckage?"*

"If you've been loved enough to have been dragged, pulled, encouraged, held through any of life's difficult paths, you're blessed, because too many folks in this world fall through the cracks. And hear this: whoever is pulling you along? Whoever is insisting that you Will. Not. Fall? has been there—pulled along by someone else—and is reaching back to pull someone else along, paying forward the blessing.

**"There simply is no getting through this life alone.** This myth of independence—forging a path in isolation... This myth that we do anything at all without standing on the shoulders of countless others is utter and complete fantasy. John Donne was right: no one is an island. And to pretend otherwise not only is pointless, it's a wee bit arrogant.

"And I know. I'm blessed to have been surrounded, in all my memory, by real community. I speak from that privilege. I used to take that for granted. But over the years—partly as a pastor observing the lives of others, and partly from my own personal life—I've seen what isolation and loneliness can do to a person.

So here's what I get out of the relationship between Elijah and Elisha: "if you've had the very good fortune to be pulled along at some point in your life, a really great way to express gratitude for that would be to reach back and pull someone else along now—be for someone else, what someone else has been for you.

"It is, in many ways, a wonderful time to be alive. In other ways, it's really a scary time. But the best way into whatever's next is to be willing to find it together: to be willing to risk some vulnerability, extend some compassion, open our

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hearts and our lives to someone who needs both, and offer these words, *“As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”* *Prayer Slide*