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We are going to look more closely at 2 of our readings today, the Old Testament reading and Psalm 77

Our first reading in 2 Kings chapter 2 tells us the account of Elijah who is taken up into heaven without passing through death. The emphasis, however in this account, seems to be more on the relationship between Elijah and Elisha than the miraculous departure. They were both very highly regarded in the school of prophets as well as by the rulers of their country. The idea of a double portion in the bible is one of double blessing. It was typically used in the OT to refer to the birth right, or the inheritance received by the oldest son because he is the first sign of his father's strength (Deut 21:17). Hannah's husband gave her a double portion or a generous helping because of his love for her and because she could not have children (1 Samuel 1:5). Isaiah promised a double portion of blessing on Israel, he prophesied 'Instead of shame, my people will have a double portion, and instead of disgrace you will rejoice in your inheritance. And so you will inherit a double portion in your land, and everlasting joy will be yours (Isaiah 61:7). After his sufferings, Job received twice as much as he had before (Job 42:10). Rev 18:6 speaks negatively of a double portion of judgment. The request by Elisha for a double portion of Elijah's spirit in 2 Kings 2 referred to being doubly blessed in his life and ministry. Scripture records exactly twice as many miracles through Elisha (28) as took place through Elijah (14). The taking of Elijah to heaven, the parting of the water, the response from the company of prophets who saw it and who said, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha' and who came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him and from that point appeared to follow him as their spiritual leader, all affirmed that Elisha's request for a double portion was both honourable and granted by the Lord. Elisha's ministry was one of the most influential in the Bible and continues to be remembered today. Elijah was taken up without experiencing death and Elisha's bones brought a corpse back to life (2 Kings 13). Elijah was a hairy man (2 Kings 1:8) while Elisha was bald (2 Kings 2:23). It was initially a funny story when a very large group of boys started jeering Elisha as he was going up to Bethel. They all yelled at him and said, 'Get out of here, baldy! They continued and he turned around, looked at them and cursed them in God's name. Two bears came out of the woods and mauled 42 of the boys. It was providential that none of them died. In comparison, most of Elijah's ministry was directly confronting powerful worldly figures like Ahab, Jezebel, and Ahaziah, while Elisha's ministry was with the common people and was modest with deeds of compassion. He cleansed the

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waters of Jericho (2:19-22), fed 100 hungry men by multiplying corn and bread (4:42-44) and cured a gentile of leprosy (5:14). Elisha was remembered as the one who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah, possibly the younger prophet Elisha held the pitcher of water and poured it over the hands of his mentor. The New Testament mentions Elijah 29 times and Elisha once. Before Jesus ever spoke the words, Elisha knew something of the truth that the greatest in God's kingdom are the servants of all (Mark 9:35). When we meet Elisha in heaven, he will probably introduce himself by saying with a smile, 'I'm the one who poured water on the hands of Elijah!'

In our Psalm 77 we are only given verses 1 and 2 then we jump to verses 11 to 20. The first 10 verses of this psalm, most of which we didn't hear are a desperate cry to God for help. Here is a man who faced a very distressing circumstance which sent him straight to God, seeking real answers to his questions. He tells how he prayed and wept and tried to meditate on God all night long but to his great distress he received no help from God at all. He says, I poured out my complaint to you, God. I lifted up my voice, shouting to you for your help. When I was in deep distress, in my day of trouble, I reached out for you with hands stretched to heaven. Over and over, I kept looking for you, God, but your comforting grace was nowhere to be found. As I thought of you, I moaned, 'God, where are you?' I'm overwhelmed with despair as I wait for your help to arrive. I can't get a wink of sleep until you come and comfort me. Now, I'm too burdened to even pray.

My mind wandered, thinking of days gone by – the years long since passed. I remembered the worship songs I used to sing, ...Has your well of sweet mercy dried up? Will your promises never come true? Have you somehow forgotten to show me love? Are you so angry that you've closed your heart of compassion toward me? Lord, what wounds me most is that it's somehow my fault that you've changed your heart toward me.

He suddenly realises that he has a greater problem to deal with, that of his doubts whether God is indeed real and is his faith in God valid? He is suddenly faced with the possibility of losing his faith completely. This was a very frightening possibility. The seeming logic of his questions drives him to an undesired conclusion. But he can find no way out. He comes to the conclusion that God is changeable and cannot be depended upon. He expresses what his faulty logic has driven him to. **Some have called this psalm a cure for hopeless depression.**

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Now, I should know about depression as I have spent the last 25 years as a Clinical Psychologist studying depression and ways to alleviate it. In the development of my own therapy for depression I discovered some basic elements for recovery. **Our brains can change even in old age**; however, we need to train our brains in the right way. We often respond unconsciously to life. You can hear people conversing about life and complaining about the young, or the weather, or the people around them. We unconsciously fall into negative habits of judgment and negativity.

The therapy I pioneered is a brain-training therapy that uses positive spoken statements that challenge the way we see the world around us and that seem counterintuitive to what we see and feel. When I look at this psalm, I see the unconscious effort to make sense of the world and the circumstance in which the psalmist finds himself and it's almost a childlike response. He is querulous, angry, self-blaming, he prays and weeps and tries to meditate but cannot. In therapy we learn to identify that childlike part of us, our emotions and feelings, the part that is screaming out for help, the part that demands attention and refuses to be calmed and blames self and others. It's that inner child that is out of control and won't be comforted. In therapy clients learn how to calm the child voice and how to use their rational adult voice.

Halfway through Psalm 77 we see the psalmist change his tune entirely. In verses 11 and 12 we have a sudden change of direction, he says, 'Yet, I could never forget all your miracles, my God, as I remember all your wonders of old. I ponder all you've done, Lord, musing on all your miracles. It's here in your presence, in your sanctuary, where I learn more of your ways, for holiness is revealed in everything you do. Lord, you're the one and only, the great and glorious God! Your display of wonders, miracles, and power makes the nations acknowledge you. By your glory-bursts you've rescued us over and over'. And so, it goes on to the end of the psalm.

He focuses purely on the present moment. There are no negative words. He extols God. He recounts all the mighty things God has done. He no longer focuses on himself; he turns his focus to God. He rejoices in what God has done and praises his mighty works. Can you see what this did for him? It turned his heart completely around. He was no longer complaining. He wasn't

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seeking attention. He wasn't looking for someone to blame. All his words were positive and optimistic.

Have a look at these positive words that he uses in the Passion Translation, 'Mighty One, right hand of power, miracles, in your presence, learn of your ways, holiness, the one and only, the great and glorious God, wonders, glory-bursts, rescue, beloved, truth, shouting your story, light, sound, wind, you led your people, blessed by the leadership' and others.

Can you turn your story around? Can you write your own psalm? Perhaps you can just use positive words to express to God the truths about God and it will take your mind off your worries

Another powerful element in the recovery from depression is **repetition**. That's why we have Psalm 77. It has been repeated through the ages and it has become a true remedy for those who are mourning, who are sad and depressed. Try it tonight! Or if you can't create something yourself why not begin to repeat Psalm 77 from verse 11 to the end. Preferably in a translation that is joyful and makes sense to you. So, remember these two things, your brain can change, and through repetition you can teach your brain and your subconscious a different way to be. So, stop living an unconscious existence by worrying and complaining and start challenging your brain through positive words and repetition.

Through the story of Elijah and Elisha we see that God can use us in mighty ways or in humble ways. And in our Psalm, we see how we can be conformed to this world and only see the negatives and how that way of thinking leads to loss of faith and nihilism, but if we decide to live in the moment in the presence of God we can choose to speak up about God and how great and mighty God is. And that brings us hope and faith.

Let us pray

Father in Heaven, thank you for the path that you have chosen for us. May we perform mighty deeds and miracles like Elijah. May we be like him and be taken up in a whirlwind and not see death. Or may we be like Elisha and humbly and faithfully perform the tasks before us and serve others. Help us to live consciously and choose our words wisely, to be positive and non-judgmental in all we say and do. Help us to focus on you and all you have done. May we sing your praises and glory in your name always! Amen

