“Why ‘Goodbye’ is the Right Thing to Say”
June 27, 2010, 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Christiane Lang, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 and Colossians 1:1-6, 9-10
Theme: A farewell sermon.

Let us pray. Come now, Holy Spirit, in wisdom and in truth. Illumine our minds. Enliven our hearts. Kindle our imaginations. Help us to hear the word you have for us today, and to leave this place inspired to greater faithfulness to you. Amen.

I have hugged many of you in the past few weeks. At various parties and farewell receptions, we have hugged each other, and many times one or the other of us has said, “This isn’t goodbye.” We mean, “This isn’t the end.” We mean, “I count on seeing you again.” And, “I won’t forget you.” Goodbyes are hard. So we say, “This isn’t goodbye.”

Goodbyes are hard. We just heard that old story of Elijah the prophet being taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot while Elisha the younger prophet, who has refused to leave him, calls after him. It is a story of a hard goodbye. I have to admit that when I looked up the assigned lectionary texts for today, my final Sunday at The Brick Church, and found a story of farewell, this goodbye between Elijah and Elisha, I was stunned and grateful.

But before I talk any more about their story, I should clarify. I don’t mean this story as any exact metaphor for my own departure. Elijah in the Biblical story is the one who leaves, and in our story together, I am about to depart. But let me be clear. I am no Prophet Elijah. I don’t come anywhere close. I’ve never performed a miracle or heard God speak directly. When a moving van drives my belongings away next week, it won’t look anything like Elijah’s fiery chariot, and I don’t expect any of you to stand on the sidewalk and cry after me. Elijah was swept into heaven, and I am moving to Princeton, New Jersey, which is a pretty lovely place, but the similarities end there.

Still, it has been good for me to ponder this story as I have prepared to move. Because Elijah and Elisha were partners in ministry. Elijah had adopted Elisha when Elisha was a young man. Elisha had been working in a field, and Elijah approached and, to show he was adopting him, threw his prophet’s mantle—something like a cape—over Elisha. After that, they traveled a long road together. They saw and felt God work in mighty ways. They shared adventures. They cared about each other. Goodbye for them was hard, because ministry together had been so good.

In the end, no matter how long they stalled, the fiery chariot swept in and took Elijah up in the mysterious divine whirlwind. Only his prophetic mantle fluttered to the ground. Elisha was left behind, and in deep grief he tore his own clothes. Then he picked up the mantle that had belonged to his teacher. He went back to cross the Jordan River and go home, and, doing as Elijah had done before, Elisha took the mantle and struck the water with it, and he cried out, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?!” Then, wondrously, the water parted for Elisha as it had parted for Elijah before him, and the young man crossed over into a new phase of his own ministry.
Elisha, mantle in hand, asked where God was now that Elijah was gone, now that an important chapter of life and ministry was done. When those waters parted, it became clear that the answer to his question was that the God of his teacher Elijah was right there, right then, with Elisha. The God of Elijah was also the God of Elisha. Elijah the great prophet may have disappeared, but God hadn’t gone anywhere at all.

The waters parted at Elisha’s anguished question as though to say, “God’s presence isn’t limited to one person, place, or time.” God worked in the past through Elijah to teach and inspire the people of Israel. God will work in the future through Elisha to do the same. God is faithful yesterday, today, and forever, even in the midst of hard goodbyes.

By the grace of God, your story and mine have intersected for the past five years. We also have journeyed together, and we have seen God at work. Sometimes I have been the teacher and you have been the learners. Very frequently, you have been the teachers and I have learned from you. This congregation has been an Elijah to me, a mentor and teacher. When I came here five years ago, I was fresh out of seminary. I’d never lived in New York City. I’d never worked at a church that had no parking lot. I’d never been in a church where I had to wear a collar and a robe and a stole and tablets and black shoes. You welcomed me and helped me get oriented to this new context. You gave me grocery store suggestions and invited me to dinner. You helped me move furniture. You even took me to the doctor the morning I fainted right after preaching. (Some of you will remember that day clearly.) You told me stories from this church’s history and introduced me to potential volunteers. You attended my ordination service, when I received my own robe and stole, and hands were laid on me in prayer. You welcomed me.

And you taught me. When I came here I’d never organized a Sunday School before, let alone one with over 100 volunteers. I’d never planned Adult Education courses with a committee. I’d never preached with regularity to one congregation. I’d never baptized a baby or celebrated the Lord’s Supper or officiated weddings by myself or preached at memorial services. These and many others are tasks you entrusted me with, and things I learned to do in this place. This community has been my teacher.

You have also taught me through your personal examples. I have been privileged to be invited into your lives, sometimes into the inner moments of life where you are most vulnerable, moments of change, joy, loss, or fragile hope. You have told me your stories. Sitting in my office or walking home from committee meetings, you have told me your stories. You have spoken of moral victories and deepening faith. You have told me of your deep wounds and heavy burdens, and you have let me pray for you. I have learned and grown through these encounters with you. You have been Elijah to me; you have taught and inspired me.

Now the time has come for goodbye. And as Elijah and Elisha’s story shows, goodbyes are hard. Many of you have kindly expressed that it is difficult for you to say goodbye to me. I assure you, no matter how excited I am for what lies ahead, it is equally sad for me to say goodbye to you.

These past two weeks we have had our youth mission work days. Teenagers from this church have been doing work projects in and around New York City. We’ve painted walls and scraped
rust and cleaned kitchens and sorted boxes. We worked very hard alongside each other, often in 90-degree heat. Finally, on Friday we went rafting at the Delaware River to celebrate and to enjoy time together. We played in the water and watched hawks soar above us. We answered deep questions and ate too much candy and laughed hard. It was a nearly perfect day. As I watched those students paddle the rafts, fall off the rafts, and get back on again, I realized how much I have come to love them, how rich and rewarding working with them has been, and how very hard it is to leave this ministry.

But this I believe, wholeheartedly: Although goodbye is so hard, it can be done with great hope. Elijah departed, and a particular time of ministry came to an end. But God didn’t depart. Ministry continued on, life continued on, and the stories of the past became the encouragement of the present. I have not the slightest doubt that fruitful ministry will continue here at The Brick Church for years and years to come, because it is God who is at work among you, and God is faithful. Just as I entrust you to God, you can trust that God will lead me forward. God’s work is not limited to this place and time, and you and I will both continue to grow even as we part ways. So this is a hard goodbye said in hope.

As I said before, I have hugged many of you in the past few weeks, and often one or the other of us has said, “This isn’t goodbye.” We don’t like to say goodbye. But “goodbye” is the right thing to say, because it doesn’t mean “The end.” The word “goodbye” is a contraction of the old phrase, “God be with ye.” “Goodbye” is a word of hope and blessing.

In the Day School Chapel time at Brick Church, where we gather with a hundred preschoolers, we always end with a special goodbye blessing. The children all extend their hands to “catch the blessing,” and we all say together, “God be with you; God go with you; now and always.”

Goodbye is the right thing to say, because wherever we are, and wherever we go, the God who came among us in Jesus Christ is still among us, with each of us. When I say goodbye—“God be with ye”—to you, I believe that God will truly remain here among you. And when you say goodbye to me, you can truly trust that God’s Spirit accompanies me.

Goodbye is a word of hope and blessing, a prayer for those we love. I want to end this sermon by sharing with you two prayers I have for you as I go. The other Scripture reading we heard was from the first chapter of Colossians, in which the writer greets his friends who are far away. He writes, “…we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to God, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.”

I am a Christian educator—I have been the Pastor for Christian Education and Discipleship in this church—and my first hope has always been that you, all of you, would be filled with the kind of knowledge that is life-changing and world-transforming. My hope is that you would continue to grow in knowledge—in knowledge of God, in knowledge of Scripture, in knowledge of yourselves and one another—in the kind of knowledge that becomes wisdom, so that you will live lives that please God and bless others. This is the knowledge of discipleship. When you are a
disciple of Jesus Christ, you gain knowledge that is more than academic; it is personal and profound and changes how you go about life.

Discipleship knowledge doesn’t fall into our brains. We don’t get it by osmosis. Knowledge of God and spiritual wisdom grow over time, and they grow when we seek them, when we say, “I want to learn about my faith; I want to learn more of who God is and God’s purposes for my life.” We are meant to seek out this kind of knowledge, and Jesus promised us that when we seek the things of God, we will find them. So that’s my first hope and prayer for you, that all of you would seek to grow in knowledge and wisdom so that your lives would be transformed more and more into God’s vision for them, and so that you would be people who transform your corner of the world into the place God means it to be.

Second, I pray that you would help the children and youth of this church to learn who God is and what God has made them for. I’m thrilled that Brick Church is supporting children’s and youth ministries more fully with volunteers, resources, and staff. It is vitally important to intentionally teach the younger members of our church who they are meant to be, and to whom they belong. That kind of learning will not happen by accident, either. Children and youth learn that God passionately loves them when adults care enough to tell them and show them that. So I pray that as all of you seek knowledge and wisdom, you would pass on what you believe to children and youth. Those are my hopes and prayers for you as I depart. I pray you will seek to know God, and seek to teach children and young people. I say those prayers with confidence because I believe that God will be with you, empowering you both to learn and to teach.

Goodbyes between friends are hard. Goodbyes are especially hard when ministry together has been good. This is a very hard goodbye for me, because I do love you. But I know that our faithful God has been with you in the past, is with you now, and will be with you in the future, so “goodbye” is the right thing to say.

And so: sisters and brothers in Christ, partners in ministry, fellow travelers in life’s pilgrimage, children, youth, and adults, beloved friends: God be with you; God go with you; now and always.