healing and the destruction of a herd of pigs. Someone's assets are sharply reduced by the action of Jesus, and it may be that other acts of kindness will further threaten economic stability. It often happens.

Whatever the reason for their rejection of Jesus, the Gerasene people represent a tough mission field for the healed demoniac to tackle.

PROPER 8

Ordinary Time 13

Sunday between June 26 and July 2 inclusive

The sequence of lections from the Elijah-Elisha cycle continues with the account in 2 Kings 2:1–2, 6–14 of the transition of leadership from master to chief disciple, a theme prominent in other parts of the Bible. This (quite literal!) assumption of the mantle of Elijah's prophetic authority by Elisha finds its closest parallel in the Moses-Joshua relationship. However, echoes of the account in Acts 1 of the ascension of Jesus will not escape the reader. The passing of a great leader of God's people is necessarily the occasion of a crisis of sorts, for only the work of the Spirit of God can supply a newly empowered person around whom the people may rally. That God does not abandon the people and the fruit of the work of the Spirit may be seen in the authorization of Elisha to fill the void left by the passing of Elijah.

Psalm 77 is a cry of distress from one in trouble, but the bulk of the verses chosen, 77:1–2, 11–20, have to do with the psalmist's meditation on the goodness of God, especially on God's saving deeds in the past. References to God's mastery over the waters in vs. 16–20 make this psalm an appropriate companion piece to the passage from 2 Kings 2, where the parting of the waters of the Jordan occupies a climactic moment in the narrative (2 Kings 2:14). The memory of God's saving deeds in the past makes it possible for women and men of faith to embody the reign of God even in the midst of circumstances that suggest that God does not reign. Out of the memory of the community of faith emerges hope.

Galatians 5:1, 13–25, an important statement on Christian freedom, is also an important statement on the work of the Spirit. Freedom in Christ must not be confused with irresponsible license, basically for the reason that it is a freedom grounded in Christ and it therefore involves obligations to Christ and to others. In what manner, then, is this freedom to be lived? Through reliance on the Spirit, for the "fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (vs. 22–23).

The memory of Elijah is raised in the Gospel lection, Luke 9:51–62, for in the spirit of that prophet Jesus' disciples consider calling down fire on those who have rejected their Master (v. 54; compare 2 Kings 1:9–14). However, unlike Elijah, Jesus will hear of no such talk and rebukes his followers. Moreover, instead of calling down destruction on those who resist him, Jesus invites further resistance by a series of statements concerning the nature of discipleship, which are so sweeping in their demands that they seem all but impossible. What Jesus requires of those who would be his followers is nothing other than a single-minded faithfulness.

2 Kings 2:1–2, 6–14

The issue of succession in the leadership of God's people is addressed in several biblical texts. Most extensively, the question is highlighted in 2 Sam. 11–1 Kings 2, where trouble in King David's own household clouds the peaceful transition of authority. But the pair of biblical figures whom this day's Old Testament lection brings to mind more than any other are Moses and Joshua. For reasons discussed previously (see 1 Kings 19:1–15a; Proper 7), the inspired leadership of Moses appears to be the pattern in the mind of the writer(s) of the Elijah narratives in their description of the role of this important ninth-century prophet. In significant respects Elijah is portrayed as a new Moses, who has been designated by Yahweh to call the people of Israel back to their traditions of faithfulness and justice, traditions closely linked to God's self-revelation at Mount Sinai (or Horeb, as it was known in northern Israelite circles). As the people of Israel once had to face the bitter reality that Moses must be taken from them (Deut. 31:1–13), so the faithful worshipers of Yahweh in the kingdom of Ahab's son Jehoram are forced to confront the reality of Elijah's end.

Elijah's bitter enemy, King Ahab, is now dead, as is his son and successor, Ahaziah. A second son, Jehoram (also called Joram), now occupies the throne of the Omri dynasty (2 Kings 1:17), and it will be he who will feel the wrath of the revolt instigated by Elisha and led by Jehu, which ultimately decimates this family and removes them from power in Israel (2 Kings 9). This situation is made somewhat confusing for modern students of the period by the fact that there is also a King Jehoram, a member of the Davidic family, who rules over Judah at this time (2 Kings 8:16).

The text, in describing the events surrounding Elijah's ascension, admits the reader to the innermost emotions of Elijah's friends as the moment of his leaving draws near. Although 2:3–5 is not included in the lectionary passage, it is here that we are twice informed that those near the prophet, including his closest friend, Elisha, know what is about to happen. Elisha's simple, "Yes, I know," when forewarned by members of "the company of prophets" (Elijah's band of followers) helps the reader understand Elisha's reluctance to leave Elijah's side in vs. 2 and 6. Yahweh is about to call Elijah up on the whirlwind and, although we are not told how Elijah's friends are privy to Yahweh's counsel, it is obvious that they are. Yet Elisha does not speak the obvious. (One assumes that Elijah understands what is about to happen also, although the text does not say so directly.) Elisha simply refuses to leave the master's side. Partly this is in hope of receiving Elijah's blessing and authority (v. 9). But it is also an effort to savor every last minute of fellowship with the great prophet of God. Elijah may be so faithful that he will not taste death, but that will not overrule the sense of loss on the part of those who have known and loved him. And so Elisha clings to the prophet.

One remembers the sense of loss and bewilderment—mingled with their great joy—that struck Jesus' disciples at the moment of his ascension (Acts 1:6–11). In a similar manner, those who are with Elijah know that the moment of his leaving will come, but their mood appears to be more one of resignation than of celebration. (Note in 2 Kings 2:16–17 how Elijah's followers appear to be unwilling to accept the reality of his absence.)

The itinerary of the band moves from Gilgal to Jericho to the Jordan and then (for Elijah and Elisha only) just beyond, and it is now that the parallels to the narratives about Moses and Joshua become most evident. First, there is geography. As Elijah, like Moses, experienced an important theophany at Mount Horeb/Sinai (1 Kings 19:1–15), so Elisha, like Joshua, becomes God's leader for the people just beyond the Jordan. Second, as Joshua's new leadership received divine confirmation by means of a miraculous crossing of the Jordan (Josh. 3:14–17), in a similar manner Elisha's first act as Elijah's successor is the use of his departed master's cloak to divide the waters of the river (2 Kings 2:13–14).

Before we reach this point in the narrative, however, we encounter the description of Elijah's ascension into heaven. (Enoch is the only other person accorded this distinction in the Old Testament, Gen. 5:24.) Interestingly, there is no charge delivered to Elisha, as there is to Joshua (Deut. 31:23; Josh. 1:1–9), Solomon (1 Kings 2:1–9; 1 Chron. 28:9–21), and Jesus' disciples (Matt. 28:16–20 and else-

where). There is, in fact, some doubt expressed by the departing prophet that Elisha will inherit his (Elijah's) divine powers (2 Kings 2:10). However, it soon becomes clear that Elisha's petition has been answered in the affirmative (v. 15). The meaning of the curious phrase in 2:12, "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen," is unclear, but it is viewed by many interpreters as a manner of comparing human with divine power (the "horses . . . and chariots of fire"; note 2 Kings 6:17; 13:14).

A great and godly leader is gone, but in his place God has raised another great and godly leader. Thus the faithfulness of those who yearn to be true to the God of Israel is affirmed and given direction by the very God whom the faithful seek to follow. The manner in which this motif recurs in the Bible underscores the continuing promise of God not to abandon God's people in the times of their need.

Psalm 77:1–2, 11–20

Psalm 77 deals with a familiar pastoral, theological issue—unanswered prayer. The urgency and intensity of the psalmist's prayer is expressed by the repetition in v. 1. The psalmist has prayed tirelessly "day" and "night" without "comfort" (v. 2). Indeed, in the verses omitted from our lection (vs. 3–10), the thought of God has become a source of weakness rather than strength (v. 3). The psalmist cannot sleep; and having run out of words (v. 4), the "cry aloud" of v. 1 becomes anguished meditation (v. 6) on a series of questions that strike at the very heart of faith in God (vs. 7–9). Of particular significance in vs. 7–9 are several words that occur in God's self-revelation to Moses in Ex. 34:6—"steadfast love," "gracious," "compassion" (NRSV "merciful" in Ex. 34:6). In short, the current trouble—whether it be personal or the corporate experience of exile—causes the psalmist to doubt God's fundamental character. Verse 10 climactically summarizes this crisis of faith; the psalmist is "sick" (a more literal translation than "my grief") that God "has changed."

Verse 11 marks a transition so abrupt that many commentators have suggested that vs. 1–10 and vs. 11–20 are separate psalms. However, a common vocabulary unifies the two sections. For instance, the psalmist in vs. 11–20 continues to "remember" (the Hebrew root *zkr*, "to remember," occurs twice in v. 11, as well as in vs. 3 and 6, where NRSV translates it "think of" and "commune") and to "muse" (v. 12; see the same Hebrew word in vs. 3, 6, NRSV "meditate"). But the content and result of the psalmist's remem-

brance is quite different. Whereas his or her previous meditation had led to moaning and troubling doubt (vs. 3–10), now the meditation focuses on God's "wonders of old" and "mighty deeds" (vs. 11–12). The psalmist apparently reaches a new understanding of God's character and mode of activity—God's "way" (vs. 13, 19). Between the two references to God's "way" lies a hymnic celebration that is rich in allusion to the exodus, especially the song in Ex. 15:1–18 that celebrated the sea crossing (see, for instance, "wonders" in Ps. 77:11, 14 and Ex. 15:11; "holy"/"holiness" in Ps. 77:13 and Ex. 15:11; "might"/"strength" in Ps. 77:14 and Ex. 15:2, 13; "redeemed" in Ps. 77:15 and Ex. 15:13; "trembled" in Ps. 77:16, 18 and Ex. 15:14, as examples).

Of particular interest and significance are the affirmations about God's "way" that frame the recollection of the exodus; it is "holy" (Ps. 77:13), and it occurs in such a way that God's "footprints were unseen" (v. 19). Both these affirmations suggest the otherness and mystery of God's character and activity. What the psalmist apparently realizes in the process of recalling the exodus is that God's way is not always clearly comprehensible in terms of human ways (see Isa. 55:8–9). Or, as Marvin Tate suggests, the psalmist learns that God has God's "own schedule and often the faithful must endure the anguish of waiting" (*Psalms 51—100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20; Dallas: Word, 1990, p. 276).

Even so, this suggestion does not account for the suddenness of the transition between vs. 10 and 11 of Ps. 77, nor for the psalmist's remarkable change from seemingly hopeless despair (v. 10) to expectant waiting (see v. 20). Walter Brueggemann has suggested that the transition marked by vs. 11–12 involves "a shift from 'I' to 'Thou' " (*Israel's Praise;* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, p. 138). Verse 11b shifts to direct address of God, and the answer to the question in v. 13b begins with an emphatic pronoun: "*You* are the God who works wonders." This affirmation begins the explicit remembrance of the exodus that effectively "takes the mind off the hopelessness of self" (Brueggemann, p. 138). This transition is not an achievement of the individual psalmist. Rather, he or she articulates and participates in a communal process of remembering. As Brueggemann concludes, "Everything depends on having the public, canonical memory available which becomes in this moment of pain a quite powerful, personal hope" (p. 140).

This canonical memory would have been available and recited in worship; and, as James L. Mays points out, the recital itself is evocative of God's presence (*Psalms*, Interpretation series; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994):

> The LORD is there in the recital as the God whose right hand has not changed. The hymn [vs. 13–19] does what praise and confession are meant to do—to represent the God of revelation as the reality and subject of truth in the face of all circumstances and contrary experience.

It is clear that Mays, like Brueggemann, assumes that the psalmist is still left in the midst of "the day of my trouble" (v. 2). What *has* changed is the psalmist himself or herself. No longer an isolated self, the psalmist is part of "your people" (vs. 15, 20). Previously hopeless, he or she now lives with the faith and the hope that God still "works wonders" (v. 14a).

Brueggemann, Mays, and most other commentators clearly interpret vs. 13–19 as genuine praise. Tate is not so sure; he hears these verses as a continuation of the psalmist's "distressed meditation" (p. 275). This means that the questions of vs. 7–9 are "left open," and that the "reader must answer" (p. 275). According to Tate, while vs. 11–20 give a solid basis for answering no to the questions of vs. 7–9, "the decision is ours" (p. 276). Thus, Ps. 77 is finally a call to decision (see Luke 9:51–62, the Gospel lesson). In every age, the people of God are called on to proclaim and embody the reign of God in circumstances that make it appear that God does *not* reign. In short, Ps. 77 reminds us that we live inevitably and simultaneously as people of memory and people of hope.

Galatians 5:1, 13–25

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Paul's stirring words in Gal. 5:1 culminate his long argument about the incompatibility of faith in Jesus Christ and works of the law, and open a discussion about the particular freedom initiated by Christ.

Here the preacher and teacher need to move with great care, for the word "freedom" has connotations in contemporary North America that it surely did not have for Paul. The thesaurus identifies freedom with autonomy, independence, and sovereignty—in other words, with freedom to "do as I please." But such concepts Paul would not include in freedom, at least not in Christian freedom.

First, Christian freedom is just that: freedom *in Christ*, not freedom in and of itself. Because it is Christ who has set human beings free, they are obligated to him, bound to his service. Similarly, when he writes in v. 13 that "you were called to freedom," both parts of the statement deserve attention. The freedom Paul envisions here is freedom from the law, but equally important is his insistence on the One who does the calling. For the third time in this letter (see 1:6 and 5:8), Paul urges the Galatians to remember their calling, a calling that carries with it both freedom and obligation.

Second, the obligation of those who live in freedom is both an obligation to Christ and an obligation to one another: "Through love become slaves to one another" (v. 13). The imagery of slavery startles and perhaps even offends, for it seems (in fact, it is!) incompatible with our notions of freedom. Here as elsewhere (see especially Rom. 6), however, Paul understands that all human beings are free in some sense and enslaved in some sense. The question is from what or whom they are free and to what or whom they are enslaved. In Galatians, he urges freedom from the law, but that same freedom carries with it enslavement to Christ as liberator and also to others who belong to Christ. For Jews, of course, that obligation to others was well known in the law, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Precisely because freedom can be misunderstood and abused, Paul turns to the question of how one lives in this space *between* the law and license (that is, freedom understood as autonomy). What does freedom in Christ look like? The answer Paul gives to this question is both profound and exceedingly difficult: "Live by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16). He introduces the contrast between flesh and Spirit, a contrast that often proves confusing when "flesh" is heard as a reference to some part of an individual (that is, to the flesh or body as opposed to the spirit or soul).

Paul employs the word "flesh" in a variety of ways. "Flesh" can refer in a neutral way to the fact of physical existence, as in the phrase "flesh and blood" (see, for example, 1:16, which the NRSV translates "any human being"). "Flesh" can also refer to natural biological processes, as when Paul refers to Jesus as Israel's Messiah "according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:5). In this lection, however, flesh refers to a way of thinking or behaving that is confined to the human sphere, that operates without the guidance of the Spirit of God.

Life in the sphere of the flesh, as Paul understands it, is characterized by a variety of evils: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, and so forth. While some of these might be characterized as stemming from the limitations of physicality, others have nothing to do with the human body as such and everything to do with the orientation of the human being as a whole: quarrels, dissensions, envy, and so forth.

By contrast, the "fruit of the Spirit," according to Paul, is "love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (vs. 22–23). These gifts of the Spirit likewise have few intrinsic connections with a disciplining of the flesh. They reflect instead a mind-set that is informed by the Spirit of God and the real freedom that comes in Jesus Christ.

As commentaries on this passage will explain, much work on these passages in recent years has demonstrated that the lists of the "works of the flesh" and the "fruit of the Spirit" resemble some lists of virtues and vices that appear also in the writings of the moral philosophers of Paul's era. Such similarities should not surprise us, for they only mean that Paul attempted to state his case in terms that people could understand. More important, these similarities should not prevent our seeing the difference between the two. For the philosophers, knowledge of the virtues and vices provided a means for living the virtuous life. Paul, by contrast, holds that the virtues ("the fruit of the Spirit") come about, not as the accomplishments of human knowledge or wisdom, but as gifts of the Spirit for those who have been freed from the power of sin.

How is it possible to live as one ought without the security of the law? Paul's answer to this question is maddening: believers are to "live by the Spirit," which has certain recognizable characteristics (not rules). In a sense, the answer is tautologous: to live in Christ is to live in the Spirit, the gift of Christ. Behind such logic is, however, the radical insight that those who "belong to Christ Jesus" belong to him completely and can no longer belong to the law or to sin.

Luke 9:51–62

Today's Gospel reading is the fifth in a series of twenty-seven from the Gospel of Luke, running from the week after Trinity Sunday until the end of liturgical Year C and All Saints. Today's reading is also the first in a series of nineteen to come from the lengthy travel narrative of Luke's Gospel (9:51–19:27), actually a literary unit in which there are repeated references to journeying and, specifically, to movement toward Jerusalem.

The primary thematic stress of the travel section has to do with the coming rejection, death, and resurrection of Jesus to happen at Jerusalem, and instruction to those who accompany Jesus regarding the demands of discipleship. Since the instruction includes a variety of material (short vignettes, a mission sermon, the commandments to love God and neighbor, parables, teaching on prayer, eschatological instruction, healings, and more), and since "Ordinary Time" in the liturgical calendar makes few seasonal demands, this may be a good time for a series of sermons from Luke on discipleship or "the way of the Lord." With the notion of life as a pilgrimage with Jesus as a thematic backdrop, there are texts here that are insightful about the common tasks and trials of being a faithful follower in a hostile world.

Luke 9:51 sets the stage and hints at what is coming. Two points are made: it is the determined intent of Jesus to get to Jerusalem, and the trip will conclude with his exaltation, the completion of the divine purpose. (The Greek literally reads, "As the days for his being taken up were coming to fulfillment . . .")

The persistence that pushes Jesus to the final events of his ministry is not to be equated with fate or some unavoidable social force, but the fulfillment of a divine plan for the salvation of God's people. Furthermore, Jesus' single-mindedness in finishing his task paves the way for the later word to the disciples that they too must not let even plausible distractions deter them from persistent discipleship (9:57–62).

Some of those accompanying Jesus are given a specific task—to go ahead of the group into a Samaritan village and make preparations for a visit. Immediately they meet rejection. We are not told clearly why the Samaritans are so inhospitable ("because his face was set toward Jerusalem"). Perhaps it is because they are offended that his destination is Mount Zion and not Mount Gerizim. In any case, the reader is alerted not to be surprised if the missions authorized by Jesus are met with formidable opposition.

In retaliation for the rejection, James and John, using words reminiscent of Elijah's deeds (2 Kings 1:10–14), propose consuming the Samaritans with fire from heaven—only to be rebuked by Jesus. Now is not the time for judgment on Samaria, a territory specifically designated for mission (Acts 1:8). Furthermore, Jesus' response to repeated rejection is not a macho display of violence (see Luke 23:34). Judgment is real, but it belongs to God and happens according to God's timetable (see 10:10–12).

Then come the encounters with the three would-be disciples (9:57–62). The first seems determined enough, but Jesus confronts him with the insecurity and homelessness of life with the Son of man. With the second, Jesus takes the initiative and sharply responds to his excuse about family obligations. The third professes commitment but couples it with a delaying tactic. Jesus' words with all three are unambiguous. Discipleship places heavy demands on followers. The way Jesus takes involves an unprotected mission, a clear choice about priorities, and a clean break with the past.

The engagement with each of the followers in a sense involves matters of home and its social responsibilities. Homelessness, for example, is a condition that involves not only physical but social dislocation. One is no longer related to the family of origin, but becomes a member of a community of wanderers. Rejecting the sacred obligations to bury one's parent in order to serve under the reign of God entails a separation from the structure of the biological family. Not saying goodbyes and not even looking back vividly depict the stark choices to be made. Though not stated, implied here may be the new, reconfigured family of those "who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21; compare 14:26).

While there is a metaphorical quality about Luke's language (for example, "Let the dead bury their own dead"), it nevertheless sharply confronts the family-oriented social system of the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds with the critical nature of discipleship. The translation to the contemporary setting must somehow not water down the rigor and severity of Jesus' demands. Accommodation to social structures rather than separation from them, divided loyalties rather than single-mindedness, are more likely to characterize modern Christians, and Jesus' words can continue to challenge, prod, and even anger today's followers and would-be followers.

Proper 9

Ordinary Time 14

Sunday between July 3 and 9 inclusive

The last in the series of texts relating to the prophetic ministries of Elijah and Elisha is the narrative of the healing of the Aramean general Naaman, 2 Kings 5:1–14. The passage is a study in contrasts, portraying the arrogance of the leprous Naaman, on the one hand, and the faithfulness of Naaman's anonymous servants, on the other. Because of the trust expressed by these unnamed menials and because of the power vested in Yahweh's prophet, Elisha, Naaman's body is renewed. But much of the theological force of the narrative is found in vs. 15–19, a section not included in the day's Old Testament lection. Because these verses describe the renewal of Naaman's innermost being, his "soul," the preacher will wish to bring them under consideration. Today's psalm, Ps. 30 (see the Third Sunday of Easter), expresses God's help in suffering.

The Epistle lection, Gal. 6:(1–6) 7–16, is composed of two quite different sections. The first section, vs. 1–10, concludes the consideration of the nature of the Christian life begun at 5:1 (see Proper 8). Here emphasis is placed on the responsibilities that Christians have for one another, a responsibility founded in the "law of Christ" (6:2) and one for which Christians are to be held accountable at the last judgment. The second section (vs. 11–16) recapitulates the entire Galatian letter, especially Paul's exclamation: "A new creation is everything!" (v. 15). The gospel's radical invasion of human life is linked to nothing less than a cosmic change, initiated by God.

Luke 10:1–11, 16–20 is so difficult a text that modern readers are tempted to dismiss it as irrelevant or nonsensical. To embark on a mission with no provision made for one's well-being and to assume absolute power over "snakes and scorpions," either real or figurative, would seem the height of folly. Yet the authority of this passage lies not in its details, but in its larger declarations. Crucial in this regard is Jesus' call for prayer on the part of those who undertake his mission. The Lord who sends out the laborers is also the Lord who is