

Farther On, Further In
2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9
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English is a most confusing language, beautiful but confusing. We have words that sound exactly alike but that are spelled three different ways with three different meanings, like threw, through, and thru, or the even more infamous there, their, and they're. We have words that sound the same, but are spelled differently, like caught and ought. These are just a few of the particularities of English that trip up people trying to learn the language, but there are some that continue to fool even native speakers, and the one that has always been a problem for me is further and farther. I tend to use them interchangeably, even though they shouldn't really be substituted one for the other. According to the Internet's Grammar Girl, Mignon Fogarty, "The quick and dirty tip is to use "farther" for physical distance and "further" for metaphorical, or figurative, distance." She says, "It's easy to remember because "farther" has the word "far" in it, and "far" obviously relates to physical distance," although that never seems to work for me. Apparently, I am not the only one regularly confused by this because Ms. Fogarty notes that "It was 1906 when the first usage guide called on writers to make a distinction between 'further' and 'farther.' "

And so I went to the Bible in search of a remedy for what ails me, and lo and behold, there are two stories this week that shed some light, if you'll pardon the

pun, on my predicament: the Old Testament story of Elijah and Elisha and the chariots and horses of fire, and the Transfiguration of Jesus, which in Mark's version has his clothes becoming dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. You see, in both of these stories, as the characters journey farther on, they journey further in, as they go farther on across the countryside, or up the side of a mountain, they go further into the mystery of God's grace and love. Those who go farther with their guide, go further with him as well.

In addition to being confused by farther and further, I must also admit to being easily confused by the characters Elijah and Elisha, whose names sound just too much alike for my ears, and whose stories are joined together. So, please listen carefully and let me know if I've referred to the wrong one. Both Elijah and Elisha were prophets, God's messengers during a time of chaos that saw the people of Israel divided into two nations, and these two were charged with prophesying to the northern Kingdom of Israel. And in tonight's story we see the passing of the torch, or more specifically the mantle, the responsibility to try to help the leaders of Israel be obedient to what God had commanded them to do. At the end of our reading, Elisha stands there with Elijah's mantle, his cloak, in his hand, but of course, it wasn't as easy as just asking Elijah for it. No, he had to follow, to tag along, to go farther, to go from Gilgal to Bethel, and then from Bethel to Jericho, and then from Jericho to the Jordan River, and then across the Jordan River. At each stopping point, Elijah tells Elisha, "Stay here," but he will not be deterred.

And then finally, Elisha must go the final distance, and follow those chariots of fire as far as he can see them. And when he has gone on as far as he can go, God draws him further in, and he receives the blessing he sought, that double portion of Elijah's already magnificent spirit.

Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up the mountain. We don't know how long the journey was, but they took it. They left the comfort of their homes for a time in the wilderness with Jesus, going farther afield maybe than he had taken them before. And when they get to the mountaintop, the journey comes to them, and they don't flee, like I probably would have done, but they go farther just by sticking around. They see Jesus' clothes shining like the sun, they behold the presence of the great figures of Moses and the same Elijah, they are enveloped in cloud. And just when they have gone as far as they can go, God draws them further in, with the words, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." Amazing.

Of course, these stories are more than just a grammar lesson. They are a revelation, not just of glorious things seen by the eyes of our spiritual ancestors, but a revelation of the truth that God blesses us, and that God loves us, and gives us strength and courage to become more fully human. And they reveal that sometimes that truth requires a little effort on our part, a willingness to follow, to go on a journey, to stick around, to go farther on so we can go further in. We can perceive something about God by standing still and letting the world pass by

around us, but we'll know more, feel more, experience more, be convicted of more the farther we go with God, the farther we follow Jesus, the farther we tag along with whatever guides God has placed in our midst. Remember Mary and the other women who went to the tomb and saw the risen Jesus? They went farther on, at least farther than the rest of the disciples, and Jesus took them further in by revealing himself to them face to face. Remember when Peter walked on the surface of the water for a few moments, only to sink into the waves? His fear wouldn't let him go any farther, and so all the further he went was under water. The Bible is filled with such stories of commitment and perseverance.

Of course, the journeys we take farther on are not reckoned only by measuring the physical distance we've traveled. No, the harder journeys are sometimes those of the heart, overcoming our fear, our resistance, our comfort, our prejudices, our sin. That is the true journey of discipleship, the sticking around when it gets hard or uncomfortable, the extra effort when we are weary, the trust we need to maintain in God or others, or ourselves. When we can break through those walls, what we'll see on the other side is extraordinary. Maybe some of you have experienced "breaking the wall" in your exercise or athletic endeavors. I remember a trip I took with my good friend Jim Schmidt, at a much younger age when I did quite a bit of bicycling. We'd been out several hours up and down the hills of Northeast Ohio, probably gone at least thirty miles, and we here headed home, but between us and the promised land was one last enormous hill. And I got

about halfway up that hill and I just could not go on any farther. I tried changing to a different gear. I tried drafting behind Jim. I tried drinking more water, but nothing worked and I was just about to give up and get off the bike and walk it up to the top. But something told me to keep going, and so I did, and just a little bit farther on, I went further in. I broke through that wall, and was absolutely filled with adrenaline and energy, so much so that I practically sprinted up to the top of that hill, and cruised home, ready for another ten miles. It was maybe the biggest physical rush I've ever experienced, but more amazing than even that rush was the sense of accomplishment. I did it! I made it! I wanted to quit but I didn't, and look where it got me. Some people call that experience getting a second wind and there are a few theories about what allows it to happen. "Some scientists believe the second wind is a result of the body finding the proper balance of oxygen to counteract the buildup of lactic acid in the muscles. Others claim second winds are due to endorphin production, while still others believe it to be purely psychological." But whatever causes it, the effect is not simply that you can then run farther or bike farther, but also that you have gone further in your discipline or your self-understanding, or your sense of achievement.

I was blessed yesterday by someone who's gone farther on lately. My friend Lynn Miller from Minnesota has been learning how to play the harp. For more than three years now she has persevered in learning that instrument and yesterday, with great trepidation, she went even farther on, and posted on Facebook a short video

of herself playing the harp, her first public performance so to speak. It took her three years to be ready to take that step, but the journey farther on has taken her further in. She was overwhelmed by the reaction, from so many people telling her how blessed they had been by her dedication. And in response, she posted, “Thanks, everyone. Your ‘likes’ and comments are great encouragement. I am fortunate to have a teacher who inspires me to reach for heights I never imagined possible. I am definitely enjoying the journey.”

Sometimes however, the journey isn’t one we really want to take, but rather one we have to take, or one that’s been forced upon us. Maybe you remember the movie a few years back called “Something’s Gotta Give” with Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton. And the Nicholson character is a terrible womanizer, a “no strings attached,” love ‘em and leave ‘em type who finds himself in a relationship with the Diane Keaton character unlike any other he’s been involved in. He finds himself going so much farther on with her that he gets scared of getting further in. And so he breaks it off. But then he realizes his journey isn’t over. And this is what happens next. (Watch clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKcaY2jJTFQ>.)

“Hearing what she had to say was no picnic, but I stuck it out and I listened, and then I listened harder. When you hear the same story about yourself over and over, things begin to add up.” Spoiler alert. He gets the girl in the end, and settles down to a life he never could have hoped for. The journey of self-discovery can be brutal, but it is worth the trip.

The journey toward reconciliation is no easier, but also worth the trip, at least that's what Alvin Straight learned. At the age of seventy-three, and with legs that would hardly move, he embarked on a six week journey from Wisconsin to Minnesota – on a riding lawn mower to visit his brother, from whom he'd been estranged for a long time. Here's his story, first the trailer to the movie, and then the final scene: (Watch clips at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0zb_baTzkk and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CIOP-YkeyQ>)

If you go far enough on the journey God has put you on, you probably won't see chariots of fire or a shining Jesus hanging out with Moses and Elijah. But you will see what God wants you to see - a starry night, the tear in someone's eye, a smile where there wasn't one before. You will feel what God wants you to feel – complete, compassionate, confident. You will be blessed and you will be a blessing, just as Elisha and the disciples were as they went on from those powerful experiences. You will know that it is because Jesus Christ went farther on, all the way to the cross, that we can go further in, further in to holiness, righteousness, and discipleship.

We remember Christ's journey to the cross during the season of Lent which begins on Wednesday. Our journey through those forty days begins with ashes on our foreheads and ends with Jesus sealed in a tomb. Let me suggest that the season of Lent is a great opportunity to go further in by going farther on, by choosing a discipline for those forty days and sticking with it. Whether it is a traditional fast,

or taking on something new, or some other way of dedicating yourself to a growing awareness of what God's up to in your life, go for it beginning on Wednesday. And trust that God will strengthen you, give you a second wind, and take you further in to grace, love, and mercy than you ever could have hoped for. Amen.