

# When God Calls, Burn Your Oxen

DR. MARK GISZCZAK



Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
First Reading: 1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21

Most of life just drifts along. Day after regular day, the monotony and the routines drone on. We rarely see changes, which is why we celebrate them when they happen—weddings, baptisms, even funerals, punctuate the regular rhythm of working, eating, sleeping, living. Yet every once in a while, a divine hand breaks through the humdrum of every day life and seizes our hearts, issuing an urgent and demanding call.

## ***Discovering the Call***

When we were young, discerning the path our life was to take, most of us would have gladly traded places with young Elisha, plowing on his farm in this Sunday's first reading. For him, finding God's call on his life was easy: the wizened prophet Elijah shows up while he's working and personally throws his prophetic mantle around the young man, marking him as his successor. Often our search for God's plan is not nearly so crystal clear. We must pray, think, listen, learn, ask advice, build relationships and even then, the path itself may be murky. We might only be able to see the next step, or not even that! However, once we do make the essential decisions about vocation, career, state in life and so on, we can reach that equilibrium I mentioned at the beginning, that

place where life no longer unfolds as a series of new and exciting adventures and opportunities, but rather as the living out of commitments made long ago, the holding true to the promises we made.

### ***Follow Through***

Most of life then, after excavating and laying the foundation, is about *follow through*. It is about doing what we committed to do with consistency, fidelity, zeal. Follow through does not write headlines. Doing what you said you would do is not exciting to a tabloid. There only infidelity, broken promises and messy problems win fame and attention. One wonders if the divorce crisis in our world would be so intense if the magazines wrote about beautiful, faithful, life-long couples instead of the fourth and fifth divorces of Hollywood celebrities. Elisha, the young man, shows us what real commitment looks like. At first, we find him at his daily work, in the midst of the humdrum, and he's not sitting on his hands. He is working with 24 oxen! The text says "twelve yoke" and each yoke would involve two oxen. He's plowing his family's field as efficiently as any modern tractor. Elisha's commitment to his work demonstrates his readiness to be called by God to a new kind of work, that of prophetic ministry.

### ***Decisive Action: Burn Your Oxen***

Though Elisha readily does his daily work with fidelity, when the moment of God's call comes, he is ready to jump on it. His readiness to serve God's call reminds me of St. Paul's encouragement that we wear symbolic boots which represent "readiness for the gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15 NAB). Elisha knows who he is and is following through on his daily commitments to his family, but when the prophet comes knocking, he is ready to spring up and take action. He responds to God's call with a willing and generous heart. To solidify his new commitment to God's call, Elisha destroys his former means of sustenance, the oxen themselves. He isn't just throwing a barbeque for the neighbors, but putting his money where his mouth is. When he slaughters the oxen, it becomes clear that he is embarking on a new way of life and cannot easily return to the old. This act concretizes his commitment to prophetic ministry.

### ***Elijah on the Run***

Yet the call itself comes with a layer of ambiguity. The great prophet Elijah, despite his great success at Mt. Carmel in defeating the prophets of Baal, is now being hunted by the evil queen, Jezebel. It turns out his victory was pyrrhic. Elijah is on the run from Jezebel, cowering in fear, praying for death (1 Kgs 19:4). The Lord has to calm him down and search for a replacement, which he finds in Elisha. The Lord even tells Elijah "you shall anoint Elisha to be prophet in your place" (1 Kgs 19:16), a clear instruction. Yet when we get to the point where Elijah and Elisha meet, Elijah does not anoint him, but only throws his mantle on him and brings him along as an assistant (1 Kgs 19:21). While Elijah might still be acting out of human fear, God utilizes the prophet's possibly mixed motives for his greater purposes. Elisha does eventually succeed Elijah and receives a double anointing (2 Kgs 2:9), so everything turns out in God's plan.

dThis story of two prophets, one on the wane, running from God's call and the other green, inexperienced, yet willing to embrace the call of God whole-heartedly when it

comes, offers us a dual portrait of our own experience of relationship with God. When things are new, fresh, exciting, filled with possibilities, it is relatively easy to invest our energies, embark on a new adventure and get on board—like Elisha was willing to do. Yet after many successes and failures, many years of fidelity and trouble, even persecution, a life of fidelity to God can wear on our human frailty. We can start to coast, take things easy, forget some of our commitments, smooth over the little ways in which we fail to keep our promises, even run from the call of God. When that happens, we would do well to circle back to Elijah’s yoke-fire and taste some of that seared oxen flesh, remembering how decisive and complete his commitment to God was and how we too can “drop our nets” and follow Him—but’s ok if you go back to kiss Mom goodbye!



By **Dr. Mark Giszczak**

Mark Giszczak (“geese-check”) was born and raised in Ann Arbor, MI. He studied philosophy and theology at Ave Maria College in Ypsilanti, MI and Sacred Scripture at the Augustine Institute of Denver, CO. He recently received his Ph. D. in Biblical Studies at the Catholic University of America. He currently teaches courses in Scripture at the Augustine Institute, where he has been on faculty since 2010. Dr. Giszczak has participated in many evangelization projects and is the author of the [CatholicBibleStudent.com](http://CatholicBibleStudent.com) blog. He has written introductions to every book of the Bible that are hosted at [CatholicNewsAgency.com](http://CatholicNewsAgency.com). Dr. Giszczak, his wife and their daughter, live in Colorado where they enjoy camping and hiking in the Rocky Mountains.