



“Picking Up The Mantle”

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Scripture: 2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14

This scripture passage is packed full of exciting elements! There’s a whirlwind, a miraculous parting of the Jordan’s waters, an ascension into heaven, a chariot and horses ON FIRE, 50 prophets and a double inheritance. It only needs Matt Damon and a good car chase and it would be a summer blockbuster! There are so many things going on it is hard to keep track of it all—so here are the basics:

There are two main characters: Elijah and Elisha. (If you aren’t great with names, think “j” comes before “s” in the alphabet, and Elijah comes before Elisha.) Elijah is the older prophet. Remember a few weeks ago when Jenny preached about the prophets of Baal praying to get their sacrificial altar lit on fire by their god and then Elijah, after pouring water all over his altar prayed and God sent down the flames? It’s that Elijah.

Elisha is Elijah’s trainee. God told Elijah to give Elisha an internship in 1st Kings and now we are in 2nd Kings and it’s time for a passing of the torch, or, literally and figuratively, a laying down and picking up of the mantle.

In today’s scripture Elijah tests Elisha’s devotion saying three times, “I’m going. You can stay behind.” Each time Elisha says, “I will not leave you.” (For people familiar with the story of Naomi and Ruth, those words may sound familiar). Elisha knows Elijah is about to leave to be with God and he chooses to remain by his side. Next Elijah rolls up his mantle, his tunic, and strikes the water of the river Jordan so he and Elisha can cross on dry land. This may also sound familiar, like Moses lifting up his staff and parting the Red Sea. Then Elishah, knowing Elijah is about to leave and be with God, asks him for a double share of inheritance, like a first-born son, a legitimate heir, though they are not related. Elijah replies yes, but only if you stay and watch me be taken to God. Then a fiery chariot and horses separates the two prophets and Elijah goes up in a whirlwind. Elisha sees it all, calls Elijah “Father” and rips his clothes in grief. Elisha then takes Elijah’s mantle and strikes the Jordan waters and they part; and then we know he’s the new legitimate leader.

If you take away all of the special effects of parting water and fiery horses and a whirlwind and peel back the layers of this story to its core you discover a basic tale of two men. This story is about a man with no kingly power leaving this world and his mentee, his intern, his “adopted son” staying with him until the end and then, even while grieving, taking up the mantle and continuing the work of God.

Who are you in this story? (Remember, there is no Matt Damon character, sorry.) We are ALL called by Christ to be disciples, to be His hands and feet in this world. Whether you are an extroverted speech maker, rally-the-troops personality, or a thoughtful, under-the-radar personality who works best in one-on-one conversations, you are called to work for God. You are called to lift up justice and salvation and the promise of God’s grace regardless of your individual style.

So think, are you Elijah? You’ve done the bulk of your work, you’ve mentored others, you are testing the next leaders to check their loyalty, and someday in the foreseeable future you’re going to be with God. Or are you Elisha? Are you the one still gathering skills, proving your devotion, not ready to lose your mentors, knowing you’ll grieve, and hoping you’ll have the strength to pick up their mantle and be a leader. It doesn’t matter which one you are—what matters is that you are one of them, that you are doing God’s work in this world.

It’s not a straight up age issue. Eijahs and Elishas exist at any age. There’s no minimum age for leadership—remember Jesus teaching in the temple at age 12? Some of our back row worshipers are already leaders, as members of Eagle Scouts, in Water Ministry, or as members of Session. I see Zeta Galbreath lifting her voice and singing with the choir. I know Ben Badinger—all 9 years of him—guided the discussion at his table a few weeks ago during our intergenerational Sunday School hour. Why even one-year-old Gabby Ching is the #1 listener during the 8:30 children’s sermon. (Okay, maybe Gabby is a bit of a stretch but how can we not look at this child’s picture?)

Just as you can’t be too young to do God’s work and lead others, there is no mandatory retirement age either. Look at John Lewis, who in his 20s marched for civil rights and preached at Montreat about “Good Trouble.” This week, at the age of 76 he staged a sit in over gun violence in the US House of Representatives. An example even closer to home is Rev. Dave Fry. Do you recognize him? Maybe these other pictures will look more familiar. Dave is preaching and teaching and making us laugh and leading us from this pulpit because he has a passion for ministry, he feels called by God to do God’s work.

Anyone, regardless of your power status, can lead in God’s name. This story is in the book of Kings when ruler after ruler, Jereboam, Brasha, Jehosaphat, Nadab, Zimri, and Ahab turned away from God and from doing what was right. Elijah and Elisha, both of whom theologian Walter Breuggemann calls “dusty, wandering prophets,” are not rulers in the kingdom

but regular folks. And yet they lead in God's name. Which one of these dusty, wandering prophets are you? Maybe you are a little of both.

When you have a "significant birthday," along with the black balloons and an over-the-hill cake comes a slew of doctor's appointments. After visiting the gastroenterologist, the gynecologist, the ophthalmologist, and the bone density testing center, I didn't still didn't truly feel my age . . . until I exited the elevator on level P2 of the St. Joseph's parking garage and could not find my car. Not finding the car—a clear signal that something is slipping. Thank God for the volunteers in golf carts who drive you around as you search for your car. In tennis matches and road races, I am Elijah, my best work is behind me. BUT hear the good news! You don't have to run fast or hit a blistering overhead to visit the hospital and recognize God at work in that patient's room. And even though, when you go to Wendy's with your daughter you are given the Senior Discount without asking for it—you can still learn from those around you who have experience and wisdom to share as you begin your new ministry.

We live in a world of tumultuous leadership, where the Brexit, the British exit from the European Union, just passed and our own national and local elections, which are choices mostly between people yelling at one another, are just around the corner. Sadly, even the United Nations, perhaps the one good thing to come out of the horrors of World War II, is losing credibility by playing politics and refusing to officially condemn atrocities.ⁱ 2016 is not too terribly different than the time of 1st and 2nd Kings, 3000 years ago.ⁱⁱ It's enough to make you want to crawl back under the covers and pretend it will all go away.

How did Elijah and Elisha handle this chaotic world?

Elijah spoke truth to power. He certainly stirred up "Good Trouble." In a way, I envy Elijah because surely he drew his courage from his one-on-one instructions from God. Scripture says, "The LORD said to him" or "there came a voice." Surely some of the leaders in the modern world have been in direct contact with God. Perhaps Martin Luther King Jr. was on God's speed dial. Perhaps that was why he was able to inspire so many and had the tremendous courage like Elijah to speak truth to power.

How about Elisha, the "intern" in this story? The word intern conjures up an image of someone unsure, tentative, seeking approval and hoping not to mess up. So in that spirit, let's look at what Elisha didn't do. Elisha didn't stay behind. He didn't remain silent. He didn't shy away from asking for a double share of Spirit. He didn't look away as Elijah ascended to God but instead exclaimed out loud God's presence. Though he was shocked and grieving, he didn't crawl under the covers, but instead took up Elijah's mantle and used it, in God's name, to part the waters. I find Elisha's courage amazing because he didn't hear directly from God: he received his call to serve God in 1st Kings from another human being, Elijah. That seems more ordinary, more plausible in today's world. Today that might look like us getting a call to volunteer in some way, or we read something by an author that inspires us to act, or we are

simply drawn into relationship with another human being. That call to follow God, the call that comes through another human being, takes extra courage to follow. Elisha was tested again and again and he repeatedly said, “Yes” to God through his loyalty to Elijah and his willingness to pick up the mantle.

This week the Presbyterian USA church had our national meeting that happens once every two years. Among many other things we chose two new Co-Moderators, Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston, a new Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson, and we adopted the Belhar Confession into our Book of Confessions. Born out of the sin of apartheid in South Africa, the Belhar Confession is a call for justice and reconciliation. It’s a clear statement of how we, as Christ’s church, want to lead. One of our denomination’s leaders who voted on all of these issues is Meg Wilson. She’s a 17 year old from Ohio who is working to gather Christian, Jewish and Muslim youth groups together to find commonalities and build relationships. Meg knows that God built justice into each of us and she—and you—and I—now must say yes to the mantle Jesus has left at our feet. Our new co-moderators say they will lead us to get rid of some of the hardness we have. Together we will ask what keeps people enslaved, we’ll get to know our neighbors and we will be bold enough to embrace conflict and recognize God working through it. May we all have the vision and discernment to lead like them!

And what if we don’t feel like we can lead like them? Last week I helped plan a funeral with the two people who said to a 58 year old woman dying of cancer, “I will not leave you” and loved her right through to the end. One of those two people was the woman’s neighbor who was a “say hi at the mailbox” kind of friend until one day, somewhat impulsively, she offered to drive to chemotherapy treatments. The second person helping to plan the funeral became her friend as together they cared for a man recovering from a serious accident. It did not matter that one of them was his ex-wife and the other one was his fiancé. They did God’s work together and forged an unbreakable friendship, one that lasted through healthy times and through a cancer battle. The two women who were in my office last week planning this funeral aren’t world famous. They don’t rule any kingdoms and their names are not up for Presbyterian leadership. Each of these two women simply asked herself, “What must I do to be the one through whom new life breaks?”ⁱⁱⁱ These two women are dusty, wandering prophets with the courage to take up the mantle and do God’s work. May we all have the vision and discernment to lead like them.

Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.npr.org/2016/06/10/481501849/u-n-blasted-for-pandering-to-saudi-arabia-over-children-killed-in-yemen>

ⁱⁱ Estimated time of Elisha’s call is 850 B.C.E

ⁱⁱⁱ Elizabeth O’Conner in *Inward/Outward*, 2016.