

And I Mean to Be One, Too
2 Kings 2:1-14
2 Timothy 1:3-7

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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2 Kings 2:1-14

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, 'Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.' But Elisha said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?' And he said, 'Yes, I know; keep silent.'

Elijah said to him, 'Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho.' But he said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?' And he answered, 'Yes, I know; be silent.'

Then Elijah said to him, 'Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.' But he said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So, the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.' He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

2 Timothy 1:3-7

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason, I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Our story picks up maybe a hundred years after last week. After Solomon's death, the kingdom was divided into the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah. Both kingdoms at this time have kings who are problematic at best, evil at worst. The king of Israel is the notorious Ahab, after whom Herman Melville named his tyrannical whaling captain.¹ Ahab is married to the even-more-notorious Jezebel, a foreign queen who brought her foreign gods with her, and even brought them into the Temple.

Elijah is a prophet of God. Elijah has been a thorn in Ahab's side for years. He has preached against the worship of these idols, and fought against Jezebel's idolatrous priests with words and with the sword. Elijah is the prophet who called for drought in the whole region, and there was no rain, for years, until God commanded through Elijah for rain to start again.²

Elijah is the prophet who had the famous contest with the three hundred priests of the idol Baal, when he called down fire from heaven like a divine airstrike to consume water-soaked meat and even the stones of the altar. He then slaughtered those three hundred demoralized priests with a sword.³

Elijah fled into the wilderness and was fed by ravens. He is generally regarded as the greatest of God's prophets until the time of Jesus. He had other adventures besides the ones I've

¹ Captain Ahab, in *Moby Dick, or, The Whale* (1859).

² 1 Kings 17.

³ 1 Kings 18. See also "To Will One Thing," sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church on May 29, 2016.

mentioned, but you can read them yourself in the book of First Kings. This story is not about Elijah.

This story is about Elijah's devoted protégé, Elisha. God, it seems, is about to take Elijah, and everyone knows it.

Elijah and Elisha start out in Gilgal, a town in southern Israel. Elijah tries to get Elisha to stay there, but it doesn't work.

They go to Bethel, the place where Jacob had his dream of the stairway to Heaven.⁴ The company of prophets who were there come out and ask Elisha if he knows what is happening. He knows, and he does not want to be reminded. Elijah tries to get Elisha to stay here, but it doesn't work.

The same thing happens at Jericho. You remember Jericho, the city that Joshua captured, centuries earlier, when the people blew their trumpets and the walls came tumbling down.⁵ The prophets who are there in Jericho ask Elisha if he knows what is happening. He knows, and he does not want to be reminded. Elijah tries to get Elisha to stay here, but it doesn't work.

So, Elijah and Elisha go on to the Jordan river. This is the river that marks the border between the Promised Land and The Wilderness. The Hebrew people had crossed this river going the other way when they entered the Promised Land, at the end of their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness.

⁴ Genesis 27-28. See also "See the Stairway to Heaven," sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church on September 24, 2017.

⁵ Joshua 6.

When they get to the river, Elijah takes off his cloak, rolls it up, and hits the water with it. The water parts, and Elijah and Elisha walk across dry-shod, just like the Hebrew people through the Red Sea.⁶

Elijah asks his protégé, what he can do for him before God takes him. You know, since this is Elisha's last opportunity to ask.

Elisha asks for a hard thing. He asks his mentor to let him inherit a double share of his spirit. That may seem like an odd request, but there is a reason for it. The eldest son, in Hebrew inheritance law, got a double share of the father's property – twice as much as any of his brothers.⁷ He also got, to go with the property, his father's position as head of the family. That position carried with it the legal responsibility to take care of his mother and his sisters and any other family members who legally or really could not take care of themselves.

Elijah has no property that we know about, except that the Spirit of the Lord rested upon him. So that's what Elisha asks for a double share of. Elisha is asking to inherit Elijah's position as chief prophet of the Lord, and, with it, Elijah's responsibility to God and to the Hebrew people.

To be a prophet is just not to be some kind of a solitary figure standing at a distance to predict the future or call upon God's judgment. Being a prophet is not being detached from the people.

That would be easier.

⁶ Exodus 14.

⁷ Deuteronomy 21:17

To be a prophet is to be fully immersed in the reality and the relationships of the people to whom the prophet is sent. To be a prophet is to truly know the people, and to love them enough to tell them the truth about their condition.⁸

That is the job that Elijah has been doing, telling the king and the queen that their behavior and their worship of foreign gods is not up to God's standards.

That is the job that Elijah has been doing, faithfully trying to guide the royalty and the people back to God.

That is the job that Elijah has been doing, doing miracles when necessary to accomplish God's goals in the world.

That is the job that Elisha is called to take up.

Elijah tells Elisha that, if he can watch his mentor and father figure taken up to Heaven, that he will receive what he asks for. Then a chariot of fire separates the two men, and Elijah ascends to Heaven in a whirlwind.

Elisha grieves. He cries out. He tears his clothing in two.

But then he stands up. He picks up the mantle that Elijah had dropped, and he walks back to the Jordan River. He rolls it up, just the way that Elijah had done. He strikes the water, and it parts. He walks across the river dry-shod, just like he and Elijah had before.

A thousand years later, the Apostle Paul is writing to his protégé, Timothy, a young pastor. Paul thanks God for Timothy's faith, faith that was passed on to him from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice.

⁸ David Lose, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word* Commentary, vol. B-1, 437.

We know about that. Each of us, I'm sure, can name ancestors in the faith, whether they are our ancestors of the blood or not. We can name the people who taught us to sing, "Jesus Loves Me." The people who taught us to love God and to love other people. The people who taught us to do something about that love.

Some of those people taught us these things with lots of loud words and great fanfare. Preachers tend to be like that. Others taught us these things quietly, by what they did, and by how by they lived.

This Sunday is All Saints Sunday, when we remember the saints of the Lord who have gone before us. We thank God for their example, and for what they have taught us.

We remember Saint Peter and Saint Paul and Saint Timothy, who passed the faith on and helped it expand from a single tiny province.

We remember Martin Luther and Jean Calvin and John Knox, who reformed the Church when it had gone astray. We remember the pioneers and missionaries who brought the Christian faith to the Americas, and to the Ohio territory.

We honor the Christians who founded a church in a new housing development called Lincoln Village. Many of us remember our grandparents and our parents who raised us in the faith, raising us to praise the living God. We remember pastors and Sunday School teachers who taught us what it was to be Christian.

Depending on how old you are, some of those ancestors in the faith may be here in this room. Others are long since gone on to their Heavenly reward. None of us would be where we are today without those ancestors in the faith. Truly I tell you, we should thank them, and we should thank God for them.

But remembering and being thankful is not enough.

We have to pick up the mantle.

We don't have to do everything exactly the way that they did. It is okay to say, "You can pass the torch, but, you see, I kind of like this flashlight."⁹

But the work of the Church remains.

God's Church in the world still needs to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the sick and the prisoner.¹⁰

God's Church in the world still needs to not only feed the hungry, but advocate for them, so that they may eat tomorrow as well.

God's Church in the world still needs to stand up for the oppressed, whether they are oppressed far away or right here.

Who is this "God's Church?"

Look around you. And look in a mirror. We are God's Church. We are the hands and the feet and the voices of God in a world that doesn't seem to want to hear God's Word.

Let us give thanks to and for those who passed the mantle to us, but let us pick up the mantle.

AMEN.

⁹ My late grandfather, for example, could not have imagined writing his sermon on a computer. His grandfather would probably not have typed his. My hand starts to cramp at the thought of writing mine longhand. But that's okay. What is done matters more than the specific technology used to do it.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:31-46.