

## ***"Passing the Mantle"***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 30, 2019  
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Holy Scriptures: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 9-15 (NRSV)

### *Elijah Ascends to Heaven*

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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." <sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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.

### *Elisha Succeeds Elijah*

<sup>13</sup> He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

## **Passing the Mantle**

Passing the torch, from one servant leader to the next.

When I was in South Africa in 2010, we met so many beautiful and smart people.

We went on a safari while there.

As we bumped along in the jeep, I told the guide I had heard a rumor  
that a lion will not attack you if you are carrying a flaming torch.

Is there any truth to it?

"Well, yes and no," he said. *"It really depends on how fast you are carrying the torch."*

## **Passing the Mantle**

According to Wikipedia, the great bastion of all things wise and wonderful,

*"the mantle was originally a cape worn simply to ward off the cold.*

*The mantle was first mentioned in the Old Testament [Hebrew Scriptures],*

*as a garment worn by several prophets including Elijah and Elisha.*

*In 2 Kings 2:11-14,*

*the mantle passing from Elijah the prophet, to Elisha, his successor,*  
*symbolizes the passing of prophetic authority."*

Prophetic authority.

Pastoral and servant leadership.

Clergy and lay leaders for Christ,

serving and loving in the congregation and wider community.

Symbolism and liturgy and pomp and circumstance are valid;

they have their place in succession of authority.

Methinks there is a bit more to the passing the torch, the succession of leadership,  
than the handing of a stole or robe or mantle or the keys to the kingdom  
from one leader to the next.

When one is called to step aside,

it requires a deep faith and trust and courage

to become a cheerleader of the next one to claim the mantle,

the successor who picks up the torch.

When one is called to step aside, someone needs to step up and step in.

One does not need to know everything or be the all-in-all;

one simply needs to be willing, to show up, and love God and love one another.

The rest can be learned on the job.

I remember when we lived in Dallas, a story was shared that

Dr. W. A. Criswell, the Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church,

was holding a baby to be blessed in front of the congregation.

Now, he had been pastor there since 1944.

He announced, *"When this child grows up, he is going to be a preacher, because someone has to take my place!"*

We can well imagine Elijah and Elisha sitting side-by-side,

pontificating on what's happened, on what's around the corner,  
talking heart to heart,  
having a "come-to-Jesus" conversation.

Elijah is ready to move on.

The Lord called him, blessed him, anointed him to serve--and serve he did.

He served God as prophet,  
calling out the principalities and powers,  
holding the high and mighty accountable,  
demanding justice, looking for mercy.

He served as pastor to God's people, feeding the hungry, teaching the Word,  
encouraging and cajoling the whole people of God  
to hold fast to the covenant God has made with them and they with God.

In Hebrew Eli-jah means *My God is Yahweh [Lord]*.

To say the name Elijah -- or to even think it -- is make a faith statement!

What a ride it's been.

Now Elijah is tired, ready to rest in peace.

He has fought the good fight.

He looks around for the one whom God will send to wear the mantle of leadership.

And along comes this young 'un named Elisha.

In Hebrew Eli-sha means *My God is My Salvation*.

To say the name Elisha out loud is to make a declaration of faith.

Elisha tags along, following Elijah hither and yon,  
watching, wondering, waiting for his chance at the title.

Imagine Elijah and Elisha going back and forth,  
sharing, trading, articulating wisdom and dreams  
about what it takes to wear and bear God's mantle of servant leadership.

What do you think one who has been around the block would say to an eager soul?

What do you think one who is about to step up and step in might request of an elder?

Listen as the words of wisdom and experience, of energy and enthusiasm spark a fire.

Don't ask anyone to do something you would not be willing to do yourself;  
instead pick up a toilet plunger, a sponge to wash dishes, & model discipleship.

Don't run across a field waving, yelling over your shoulder for people to follow;  
instead walk side-by-side with your people as you go across the field, together.

Don't be afraid to say something or take a stand as if you're locked in forever;  
instead reserve the right to disagree next Sunday with what you said last week.  
We're not boxes or boxed in or boxed up!  
Strong servant leaders are open to growing, to learning,  
to admitting they may have been wrong, to confessing, saying an apology,  
that today their eyes are opened to what they missed in the past.  
If the Holy Scriptures can argue with each other, one sacred text versus another,  
if prophets and priests and parishioners can change their minds,  
then surely today's Christians can be bold to confess and forgive and grow.

Don't be shy about asking someone to join in the good works and play you envision;  
instead trust that they've the right and will to say yes, or no, or maybe later.

Don't talk yourself into thinking you are all alone when you see the challenge, the  
need;  
instead welcome and collaborate with those whom God sends.

Recently I jogged along a country road in Gordon, Georgia.

Atop a fence post was a turtle.

Two things became immediately clear:

one, I had no idea how the turtle got there,  
and secondly, both the turtle and I knew it didn't get there by itself.

Someone had to have helped.

This is what God offers and provides.

God sends help.

God sends support.

God sends resources.

If God wills for a mission to be accomplished, God will send what is needed.

May not look or sound or appear like what you expected,

and may take some adjustment on our part,  
may take some asking for more help,  
may take some listening and responding to those who ask for  
help.

The Good News is the Good Lord does provide.

I betcha Elijah looked Elisha in the eye and mentioned this one...

Don't be overcome by the vastness of the world's need, want, hunger you witness;  
instead have a vision of a brighter tomorrow  
while staying grounded in what you can do and be in the here and now.

Cartoon of a church committee that is exhausted. The caption shows the leader saying,  
*"Finally, we're in agreement: our mission statement is 'Misery loves company.'"*

Nothing stymies good people from moving forward like losing one's vision, one's hope.  
Nothing hampers positive, good works in the community like feeling overwhelmed.

See where you are headed, and keep your feet grounded where God's planted you.

Don't lose your balance when it comes to managing your ego;  
instead have the ego, the sense of Self, the gumption  
that you can make a difference,  
yet at the same time...be humble.

You might set the agenda or think you know what is best for everyone else,  
however God has a way of humbling folks, of keeping us in check.  
Someone around these parts whose initials are Nancy Shealy  
suggested a dozen years ago that  
our church sell Christmas Trees and Wreathes.

As the idea caught fire,  
I thought we were going to take a bath to the tune of \$10,000.  
I ate some humble pie and asked, "What can I do to help?"  
Turns out I was so wrong about my initial assessment.  
Thanks to amazing teamwork and a core of servant leaders,  
for the past 12 years each tree and wreath sale  
grew bigger and better and "funner" than the last.  
Someone else's idea just might be as good or even better than yours,  
so put away your pride and ask, "*What can I do to help?*"

Elijah confided to Elisha:

Don't allow yourself to think for a nanosecond  
the work and play you do is small, meaningless, insignificant.  
Instead affirm and give God thanks  
that the ministry you do and become is cosmic.  
As servants of the Living God,  
we're not simply singing songs, raising funds,  
clothing folks, filling empty bellies;  
we are changing lives.

The work and play and community service we do as great teams is cosmic,  
transformational, changing me, changing you, changing the church & the  
world.

In Calling and Character, William Willmon  
imagines the disciples shouting as they return [to Jesus],  
*"It works! We are actually ministers!"*  
The disciples return with joy and a good bit of pure astonishment.

*"Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"*

Jesus said to them,

*"I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning."* (Luke 10: 17-18)

"In other words, this ministry is much more than helping people,  
more even than healing and preaching."

Ministry in the name of Jesus is transformational, miraculous, cosmic.

"God is taking back the whole cosmos through our work."

Servant leaders look beyond our noses and see what is going on in the community.

God is using us, calling us, empowering us to work together to ensure

that there is room in the inn for the Baby Jesus and all the children of the world.

When your blood boils because you witness children kidnapped at the border,

separated from their parents and siblings and put in cages or adopted away

--and seven children so far have lost their lives in this tragic morass--

raise your voice and your vote and your vocation to injustice,

make some noise, show some poise, and mobilize,

together.

Servant leaders use the tools they have

and the resources provided

and the people sent to make a difference,

in the sweet name of Jesus, who was a refugee Himself.

Elijah and Elisha would have resonated with what Margaret Mead said:

*"Never doubt*

*that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens*

*can change the world;*

*indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."*

And as Elijah parted, going up in the whirlwind,

leaving behind a bewildered and proud and committed servant leader in Elisha,

I like to imagine he shouted, *"Have fun!"*

All work and no play make the church a very dull place, indeed.

As Emma Goldman said, *"If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."*

Servant leaders, the mantle you wear is serious, it is meaningful, it is sincere,

yet it is not devoid of joy!

People, like bees, are more attracted to honey than vinegar,

prefer a winning cause over a losing proposition,

so why offer fear and negativity when God gives an abundance of hope & joy?

Too often some sacred leaders grasp the seriousness of life and life everlasting,

yet forget it comes replete with music and dancing, love and laughter.

Enjoy life and one another in the dance of ministry.

That, my friends, is a mantle everyone can wear, bear, and share.  
Pass it on.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*