

Meadowbrook Congregational church

“The Mantle”

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II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

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

6 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. ⁷Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸Then 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.

9 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.’ ¹⁰He 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.’ ¹¹As 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. ¹²Elisha 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.

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

Last week a couple of young men from my previous church in Salt Lake City, Josh and Matt Weibel, paid me a visit. They were young teenagers when I first met them. Now Josh and Matt are in the mid-twenties. They were on their way from North Carolina to Utah and were visiting seven major league ballparks as part of their journey. They honored me by including a night at Comerica Park to watch the Tigers play as one of those stops. Josh was a big part of the camp experience the church in Utah hosted for our youth each summer. Indeed he was something of a legend at Camp Fellowship. After years as a camper he became a counselor and later Activities Director. His games and campfire routines kept the campers busy and entertained. I asked Josh if he planned to be part of the camp staff this summer. I was slightly surprised when he

told me no. He said, "My days at camp are over. I'm just like you now-part of camp history. It was fun while it lasted. But I figured it was time to let someone else take their turn and do something different."

I was reminded of the perhaps legendary story of the final opera composed by the great Giacomo Puccini. At his death in the mid-1920's, the music was not yet completed. A disciple of the composer took over and finished the work as he thought his master would have done it. In 1926, another student of Puccini's, Arturo Toscanini conducted the premiere performance of the opera, in front of a sold-out crowd including every prominent Italian except for Benito Mussolini. When the musicians reached the part where Puccini had completed his work, Toscanini abruptly stopped the orchestra. He set down his baton, turned to the audience and said, "Here the opera finishes because here the Maestro died." According to some observers, after a brief pause Toscanini then picked up the baton, turned back to the audience and said, "But his disciples finished the work." The opera then finished to thunderous applause.

The Scripture lesson today is another one of those delightful Old Testament stories whose narrative seems implausible to our modern sense of logic, but whose meaning is authentic to humanity's timeless earthly struggle. This is the story of two prophets with similar names, Elijah and Elisha. They were working in difficult times, speaking the word of God in the northern kingdom of Israel some nine centuries before the birth of Jesus. The rulers, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and their sons were not good and decent people. They worshipped false gods. They abused the poor and the weak with their use of absolute power and authority.

Elijah was the older of the two men; in fact Elisha was his student and chosen successor. In the lesson today Elijah knows that the time has come for him to be taken to heaven. Elisha knows too but he cannot bear to talk about it. Elijah wants him to stay behind while he alone faces the end. It is time to say goodbye. Elisha will have none of this and so the two men go down to Bethel together, with the reality of Elijah's death hovering over them. As they walk along, Elisha requests that Elijah not even talk about what is now most apparent.

When they reach the Jordan, Elijah asks Elisha to stay behind again. Once more the younger prophet refuses, vowing not to leave his teacher. Elijah then takes off his mantle, the holy cloth around his neck, rolls it up like a towel and snaps at the river. The water parts, just like Moses and the Red Sea, and the two men cross to the other side. There Elijah asks what he might do for Elisha before he leaves. Surely a lot of things must have run through the young man's mind. Perhaps he simply wanted Elijah to stay and to help him deal with the issues of the day. But Elisha finally says, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He must have felt unworthy before the great prophet and realized that he needed twice as much help just to get the job done by himself.

Elijah then promises Elisha that he will receive this spirit in double measure if he actually sees him die. As the two men continue their journey, a chariot of fire and horses separate them and Elijah is taken up to heaven. Elisha shouts in protest, ripping his clothes in the traditional expression of mourning. And then he sees the mantle of Elijah that has been left behind. He strikes the water with it and it parts for him. He puts it on his shoulders and he suddenly feels the spirit of the Lord now residing in him. His master was no longer there but the spirit of responsibility to accomplish the master's

mission was now upon Elisha. The mantle had been passed. The responsibility to write the story of God was now Elisha's.

"You are on your own now." That is what Elisha must have felt like when he walked across the Jordan hugging that mantle tightly across his shoulders, hoping the strength of its spirit would overcome his fear and anxiety about the future. "You are on your own now."

In a baccalaureate sermon to the Duke Divinity School Samuel Wells writes, "It's a tough call whether it's harder to be the one leaving, or harder to be the one left behind. The one leaving is heading into the unknown; the one left behind is returning to the known, but without the person who makes the known make sense." We have all been there before. A parent leaving a child on the first day of school. Graduations and new work situations. Two lovers or friends saying goodbye. A move across the country or at least away from a familiar neighborhood. A child leaving home for the first time. A spouse experiencing the loss of their partner. A church suddenly without a longtime minister. People like us who suddenly find themselves living in a world that isn't the same as it was in the comfortable good old days. There is a cold chill that runs through us as we face the experience of being alone. We grieve for the days when we could trust in others or in our comfortable environment to provide us all the answers. We fear for what might be expected of us in the time ahead.

In that same baccalaureate sermon, Wells writes of a famous preacher who was a bit of a fraud. His sermons were always great, so great that no one ever realized the fact that they had all been written by a staff assistant. Finally the assistant's patience ran out. One day the preacher was speaking to hundreds of expectant listeners and at the bottom of page two of his manuscript he read these stirring words, "And this, my friends, takes us to the very heart of the book of Habakkuk, which is..." only to turn to page three and see nothing but the dreaded words, "You're on your own now."

We are with Elisha. In some way, all of us are on our own now. The mantle has passed to us. Yet like Elisha we must know that the spirit of the Lord is upon us even in moments of sadness, fear, and uncertainty. Remembering the story of Elijah and Elisha we must remember that the spirit has been given to us. Into each of our lives comes those moments when we are supposed to pick up the pen and write the story. Into each of our lives come those opportunities when we are to raise our hands and answer the call. Into each of our lives comes a time to choose when we recognize and support the claim of God upon our choices. Into each of our lives comes the realization of what we must be to fulfill God's purpose. Into each of our lives come the occasion to preach and to live the good news of the gospel.

The mantle passed to us as the people of God means that we are never really alone. We have the wisdom of the experience of our mothers and fathers, passed down to us through lessons well learned. We have the courage of the gift of faith, the ability to trust in and act upon a promise yet to be. We have the treasure of wonder, of seeing things through the eyes of possibility and with a holy imagination. We have a community of fellowship, a place to laugh and cry, a place to serve and be served, and a place to be reminded of God's place in this whole adventure we call life. That is the mantle. That is what we all wear as the servants of God.

