

Rev. Lisa Schrott

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2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 *Picking Up the Mantle*

Last week we were introduced to Elijah, the prophet on the run from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who heard God's call to his ministry, not in the dramatic world of nature – fire, wind, or earthquake, rather in the sheer silence. During his years as a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel, Elijah performed many miracles and healings. References to Elijah appear throughout the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures and he, like Moses, is considered to a harbinger of the Messiah. One of the reasons Elijah is so revered by those in the Jewish and Christian faiths is that he defended the worship of the Hebrew God over that of the myriad gods of the Canaanite culture, especially the god Baal. Elijah called out the bad behavior of Ahab and Jezebel over and over again, speaking truth to power, putting his own life in danger time and time again. If that didn't keep Elijah busy enough, Elijah also led a "school of prophets." Elijah's successor was chosen through this school. This morning we hear the story of that transition, as Elijah ends his prophetic ministry in a dramatic fashion and Elisha picks up the mantle to carry on. Hear now these words from 2 Kings:

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.

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, and 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. He said, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Where is he?" He struck the water again, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha crossed over.
This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Throughout the Old Testament we hear dramatic call stories, where the Lord God comes and speaks directly to the one being called. Isaiah had a vision of the Lord on his throne, surrounded by seraphs who touched his lips with a live coal, declaring that Isaiah's sin had been blotted out. To which Isaiah responded: "Here I am, send me." Samuel also said the words, "Hear I am" when God called to him in the middle of the night. Samuel was still a boy, and was working at the temple under the prophet Eli. One of my favorite call stories is that of Jeremiah. Jeremiah's recounts:

The Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."¹

Now that is a charge! So the calling of Elisha as a prophet to the people of Israel doesn't quite fit the same mold. Instead of a personal call by God, Elisha's prophetic call is more of a transfer or leadership - a hand-off from his predecessor and mentor Elijah. Prior to our passage today, in 1 Kings chapter 19, it is Elijah who hears the word of God that Elisha is to be his successor.

Put yourself in Elisha's shoes. You have been tapped to follow Elijah – this prophet whose faithfulness to the Lord God is legendary, who has displayed courage and integrity time and time again; who has followed God's call into the wilderness and to the halls of power, who has trusted God to prevail over the greatest of odds. Elijah, who as we hear this morning, does not die a conventional death, rather is whisked into heaven by chariots of fire. Yes, you Elisha have been tapped to follow your mentor Elijah.

Like a good student, Elisha has been following Elijah in his journeys. Even when Elijah says to him that he can stay behind while Elijah goes ahead, Elisha stays with him. I can hear him saying in his head... "No way am I going to miss an opportunity to see Elijah in action. I need to absorb every detail of what he does." He watches as Elijah rolls up his mantle, or his outer cloak, and striking the Jordan River such that it parts and they can cross on dry ground. For Elisha, the bells are going off in his head... Moses parted the waters, Joshua parted the waters and now Elijah. Elisha knows there are some big challenges ahead.

Moses was leading people from oppression into freedom, freedom that they finally achieved when Joshua led them into the promised land. Elijah and now Elisha are likewise called to lead the people from the bondage that comes from following false gods and corrupt leaders into a new way of being. Elisha understands the significance and challenge of this moment, so when Elijah asks him what he can do for him before departs, Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit. This is not an ask of power, rather a literal ask for the "breath of God" to be imparted to him. The word for "spirit" in the Hebrew is "ruach," the Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation, forming order out of the chaos. Elisha knew he needed this Spirit if he were to follow in Elijah's footsteps.

As Christian theologian and ethicist Trevor Eppheimer notes, Elisha knew that Israel's main challenge is remaining faithful to the Lord God in a world in which the kings appears to have all

¹ Jeremiah 1:4-10

of the power. Israel is continually tempted to accept the kings' view of reality and operate as if the kings had all the power. The unique call of the prophet is to open the nation's eyes to illusory nature of the kings' power – to cut through the thick smoke screen – so that the ultimate reality of God's power can be seen. So yes, Elisha is going to need that double share of God's spirit if he is going to pick up the mantle from Elijah.²

The phrase “passing the mantle” or “picking up the mantle” has become part of our common vocabulary that often we don't appreciate the origins of the phrase. I remember hearing that phrase and thinking that it referred to the baseball player Mickey Mantle, as in whatever NY Yankee followed Mickey Mantle had a tough road ahead of him. For the record it was Joe Pepitone. For Elisha, picking up the mantle from Elijah was more than just a handoff of job titles, it was going to be finding his voice as a leader. Elisha was being called to lead with presence.

Leadership consultant the Rev. Susan Beaumont describes in her book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going*, (a book Elisha could have used), that presence is a quality of awareness. Beaumont says, “When leading most of us are aware of *what* we do and what others do. We are also aware of *how* we do things, the processes we follow when we act. Most of us are less aware of *why* we do what we do, the inner source from which our actions arise.”³

Beaumont writes about the restricted awareness we often have because we interpret our present reality in light only of our past experiences. We make assumptions without realizing we are making assumptions. In order to expand our awareness we have get a different view – different perspective. Leadership consultants often refer to this as the balcony view or the airplane view. Beaumont adds to this from a theological perspective, arguing that our expanded awareness comes from putting on the mind of Christ – or having Christ consciousness. This allows us to move from echoes chambers filled with voices of judgement, cynicism and fear to making ourselves vulnerable by being open to where God is leading. And it is a vulnerable place. We have to embrace a very countercultural shift. Rather than being assured in knowledge, advocating for our causes, and striving to accomplish goals, instead we acknowledge we don't have all the answers, we attend to the possibilities and we surrender to God's call. While the term “surrender” has a lot of connotations to it, Beaumont describes it as “accepting the past for what it was, embracing the present reality, yielding to the mystery of the future and the mystery of God in that future.”⁴ Our Call to Worship this morning echoed that language.

Elisha certainly faced that challenge. When he picked up Elijah's mantle, he acknowledged the past, present and future all at the same time. Our passage ended with these words:

Elisha 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. He said, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Where is he?” He struck the water again, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha crossed over.

² Trevor Eppenhimer. 2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14. *Feasting on the Word. Year C. Volume 3*. Ed. By David L. Bartlett and Barbard Brown-Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

³ Susan Beaumont. *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going. Leading in a Liminal Season*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, p26

⁴ *ibid* p43

Elisha crossed over, yielded to the mystery of what lay ahead, accepting the past for what it is was and embracing the present reality. Not an easy task for Elisha. He could have spent his days waxing nostalgic for the glory days of the past, resting on the laurels of Elijah's victories over the foreign gods of Ahab and Jezebel. He could have wished away the present reality of Elijah being whisked away by the chariots of fire, biding his time for Elijah to return and save the day. He could have hunkered down, protected his assets, made sure he had enough supplies and weapons to survive whatever the next king would throw his way. Instead he crossed over into the mystery of the unknown, into the mystery of the liminal space.

Not an easy task for Elisha and this not an easy task for us. With all of that is happening in the world – from natural disasters to wars to political upheavals; from pandemics to inflation and climate change; from mass shootings to books being banned to rights being removed, it is hard for us to follow Elisha's path and yield to the mystery of what lies ahead instead of trying to return to a past.

The Rev. Peter Marty wrote about this temptation in his column in this week's issue of the *Christian Century*. He says, "The windshield on my car is five feet by three feet in dimension. I know this because I just measured it. The rearview mirror inside is 9 inches by 2 inches. There's a reason the windshield is about 100 times larger than the mirror: cars are designed to be driven forward. Drivers benefit from having an optimal view of where they're headed.

It strikes me that a lot of people spend their days trying to steer their way through life by fixating on the rearview mirror. What's behind them in their own life's experience guides their navigational instincts. Instead of believing that God or anybody else might be beckoning them toward a new future, they're more focused on recovering the past. The orientation map they rely on keeps directing them backward rather than forward, which turns out to be a pretty difficult way to drive.⁵

Elisha picked up the mantle, struck the water, and crossed over on dry land, yielding to the mystery of God. While he may have been mentored by Elijah and was tapped to be his successor, Elisha had to follow his own path as prophet. He had to embrace that God would call him to unique situations and that God's spirit would guide him in his call. While periodic peaks in the rearview mirror would help keep him on track, Elisha needed to make sure he spent enough of his time looking forward through the windshield. That is our call too as the body of Christ. As we sang this morning, we are called as partners in Christ's service, called to ministries of grace and justice. We are called to make sure that all have a place at the table as we will sing in a few minutes. We are called to pick up the mantle from those who have gone before us, yielding to the mystery of the future and the mystery of God in that future. May it be so. Join me prayer....

⁵ Peter W. Marty. Looking Ahead. Life isn't meant to be lived in the rearview mirror. *Christian Century*. June 17, 2022. Available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/editor/publisher/looking-ahead>