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Matthew 17:1-8 & 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

*Stories of Our Faith: What Do We Pass On?*

First and Second Kings form a single narrative of the history of the Hebrew people, from the time just after King David's death when his son Solomon became king, around 970 BCE to the exile of the Hebrews to Babylon, around 560 BCE. It is a span of about 400 years which includes the building of the Temple and the splitting of the unified kingdom into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom had 19 kings before it was conquered by Assyria. The Southern Kingdom had about 20 kings before it was conquered by Babylon. While the Book of Kings is structured around the various kings, a few of whom were good and followed the ways of the Lord, and most who were not, it is really the prophets who steal the show. And the star prophet is Elijah. We delved into some of Elijah's story last week and we will hear about the end of his life this morning and the prophet Elisha who succeeds him. Hear now these words from Second Kings Chapter 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. 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 Elisha 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." Elijah 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 Elijah, Elisha grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

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. Elisha 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. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

“Marcia, Marcia, Marcia... “ For those of a certain generation (that would be me!), those three words summarize a lot of sentiment of what it means to follow after someone who, at least on the outside to others, has it all together when you feel like you don’t. This phrase has become synonymous with being overshadowed and underestimated. And while Elisha never watched *The Brady Bunch*, from which this quote came, I think he would sympathize with Jan Brady, a middle child who was always being compared to her older sister Marcia, who was beautiful, accomplished, and popular.<sup>1</sup> I won’t spoil all of the details of the episode “Her Sister’s Shadow” lest you want to stream it (available on multiple platforms), but in the 24 min of the episode, Jan comes to realize that she can be her own person, even with if she doesn’t make the pom-pom team or win the essay contest, and even if she has such a prominent older sister. The episode ends with the youngest daughter Cindy, complaining that everyone at school is saying “Jan, Jan, Jan” after Jan displays integrity in an essay contest.

In the great prophetic history of the church, Elijah is the Marcia Brady. He overshadows the other prophets, even the ones like Isaiah and Jeremiah who have books named after them. In the Jewish tradition, Elijah is revered above other prophets. As Professor C. Melissa Snarr notes, “Elijah is the special messenger who points his people to the coming Messiah (Mal. 4:5-6). During the Passover Seder meal, Jews enact Elijah’s importance, pouring him a cup of wine and opening the door for him at the meal’s conclusion. The fifth cup of wine, Elijah’s cup, is not consumed and represents a return to the land and the future redemption he promised. Elijah both reminds the community of redemptions that have come before and beckons them into the almost unimaginable messianic redemption that awaits them.”<sup>2</sup>

So is it any wonder that in the story of the “Transfiguration of Jesus,” a familiar story we hear each year just before Lent begins, that the disciples see Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus. As we heard Zach read: “Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Moses and Elijah – Moses, the great deliverer from the bonds of slavery, shaping community as he led the people to their new home in Canaan, and Elijah, the prophet who spoke truth to power and reminded the people of the power of their one Lord God – including the “unimaginable messianic redemption that awaits them” as C. Melissa Snarr notes.

So it is into this reality that Elisha begins his work as a prophet. We did not hear Elisha’s call story, which is recorded in 1 Kings 19. It comes just after the passage of scripture we heard last week, when Elijah heard the voice of the Lord in the silence. The Lord tells Elijah: “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel, and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.” So Elijah went and found Elisha working in the fields, plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. He threw his mantle, his coat or cloak,

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0531099/>; <https://bradybunchreviewed.wordpress.com/2017/09/22/episode-10-her-sisters-shadow/>

<sup>2</sup> C. Melissa Snarr. Commentary on Proper 8. 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14. *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Edited by Joel B. Green et al., Westminster John Knox Press., 2019, p111.

over Elisha. A mantle not only kept people warm and protected them from the elements, it also served a symbolic purpose, especially for prophets, in that it showed they were wrapped in God's authority. So when Elijah threw his mantle around Elisha, it signified that the Lord had called a Elisha as a prophet. He was chosen and marked. A sign and a seal, much like the waters of baptism.

Elisha responded to this anointing by leaving his old life behind. He kisses his parents goodbye, burns his plowing equipment, slaughters the oxen to feed his community. Then Elijah sets out and Elisha follows. 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 and strike 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 parted the waters.

Moses led the people from oppression into freedom, freedom that they finally achieved when Joshua led them into the promised land. Elijah was likewise called to lead the people from the bondage that comes from following false gods and corrupt leaders into a new way of being. And Elisha was passed this mantle. He understands the significance and challenge of this moment. He knows he has big shoes to follow. Elisha was going to follow in the footsteps of this most powerful and connected prophet. How could he not feel overshadowed? And Elisha didn't yet even know the most dramatic part of Elijah's story – that Elijah would be taken up to heaven bodily, without experiencing death.

So when Elijah asks him what he, Elijah, can do for him, what he can pass on to Elisha, before he departs, Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit. At first glance, this can seem to reinforce Elisha in the position of one being overshadowed, one who perceives himself to be "less than" the mighty Elijah, as if he needs two-helpings of Elijah's spirit to take on the role of a prophet. And yet a closer look at this request gives a different perspective.

In the Hebrew patriarchal tradition, a "double share" of the inheritance is given to the oldest son. This particular practice is prescribed in the rules laid down in Deuteronomy, laws Moses spoke to gathered community just before they entered Canaan. Now there were a few prominent exceptions to this rule, notably Jacob and Solomon. However it was the expectation and it was the mark of succession. And what does Elisha ask Elijah to pass on to him? 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.

And Elijah granted this request. He passed on a "double share" of his spirit to Elisha. How do we know this happened? Elijah responded to the request saying, "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!”

Elisha saw Elijah being taken from him, just as Elijah had said. And then Elisha picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan and struck the water. Elisha said, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Where is he?” He struck the water again, and the water was parted, and Elisha crossed over. Elisha is the successor – authenticated by these actions. And the next six chapters of Second Kings will tell of Elisha’s prophetic ministry. We will get to hear some of that in two weeks on July 13. It wasn’t always pretty. Elisha faced challenges as tough as his predecessor and yet he kept going and followed the Lord.

As I think about what Elijah passed on to Elisha, it struck me that more than anything what Elijah was passing on was his confidence and trust in Elisha as a prophet, which really meant his confidence and trust that the Lord God would speak to Elisha **AND** his confidence and trust that Elisha would listen. That Elisha would wield his prophetic powers for the work of the Lord and not his own personal benefit; not to take down his personal enemies, not to exploit his position for fame and fortune. That Elisha would continue to the tradition of speaking truth to power, and continue seeking to call the people to worship their Lord God, and not the false idols so prevalent in society.

After receiving the assurance of the double share of Elijah’s spirit and Elijah’s mantle as a symbol of his succession, Elisha puts one foot in front of the other and walks into an uncertain future. This is the story of our faith. This is what Elisha passed on to us. The recognition that we don’t have to have all of the answers before we take a step. That as a church, we may not be as big and mighty as some other churches or even the PCO of the past. And yet, that we can step out with the confidence and trust that God is still speaking in our world. That God is still speaking to us at PCO.

This is what I hope we pass on to the PCO of the future. A willingness to trust in God’s plan and believe in each other as siblings. A willingness to be bold. To take chances. To do what the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor says in the words of preparation in the bulletin: “The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God’s sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith.”<sup>3</sup> The story of our faith is to become the living word and to pass on that living word. The story of our faith is to embody Elijah and be generous in passing on the spirit of the Lord to others, allowing them to listen for God’s voice as they lead. And the story of our faith is to embody Elisha and accept the mantle passed on to us with confidence that God will speak to us. May it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, Harper One. 2006, p 107.