

Sermon: 2/19/12: 2 Kings 2:1-12: "Passing the Mantle"

¹ When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

³ The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet." ⁴ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho."

And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. ⁵ The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet."

⁶ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan."

And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So, the two of them walked on. ⁷ Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

¹⁰ "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."

¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. ¹³ Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. ¹⁵ The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

It's never easy following in the footsteps of a living legend. The prophet Elijah had raised the dead, brought down fire from the sky and in our passage today went up to heaven in a whirlwind. In the New Testament he is compared to Jesus and John the Baptist, and costarred with Moses and our Savior during the transfiguration. When I was growing up, us Jewish folks set a place for Elijah at the Passover dinner table, believing that Elijah could return at any time to trumpet the coming of the Messiah, on that "**great and terrible day of the Lord.**" Elijah was an awfully hard act to follow.

Yet God was about ready to give Elijah his retirement party after 20 years of faithful service. In the first Book of Kings, Elijah had **passed the mantle** to Elisha, placing it across his shoulders as he walked by. *The Hebrew word for "mantle" refers to a cloak woven from animal hair, which was the prophet's official uniform, and a symbol of his dedication and commitment to God.*

God was just about to call Elijah home. In his heyday, he had done battle with the prophets of Baal and came out victorious. But now in his sunset year Elijah had "lost his swagger." He spent his days fleeing from Jezebel and hiding in a cave. He had forgotten God's provisions of the past, and his own accomplishments. He became depressed and lost hope. Even the Lord's encouragement was no longer a consolation to him. God was ready to give this burned out prophet his gold watch, and congratulate him on his retirement.

In today's passage, just before God took Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, he told Elisha to remain put, claiming that the Lord had called him to take care of some business in Bethel. But Elisha refused to abandon the man who has been

both mentor and spiritual father. He said, "**As surely as the Lord lives, I will not leave you,**" and so he followed Elijah on his journey. Now there was a group of prophets in Bethel, who were worried that Elisha was too young and naive to understand what was going on. They said, "**Boy, do you know that God is going to take Elijah from you this very day?**" Elijah told them that *of course* he understood, and they needed to shut their mouths and mind their own business.

Elijah was still trying to get to his final destination alone, and in peace. He said, "**Stay here, Elisha, the Lord has sent me to Jericho.**" But again the young man refused to abandon his mentor, and followed him there as well. Then Elijah said, "**Stay here, the Lord has sent me to Jordan.**" And a third time, Elisha said that he would not abandon his master, and so the two of them walked on.

If you were to look at a map of their journey from Gilgal to Bethel, to Jericho to the Jordan, you would realize that Elijah was leading his protégé on a wild goose chase. They were on a journey to nowhere; and their final destination was just a stone's throw from where they had begun. Elijah had been trying to shake Elisha's tail, but to no avail. The young man was too loyal to abandon his master, even though he knew that Elijah was soon to be taken from his presence and his heart would be grieved. *Yet, would the young protégé have the courage to step up and accept the passing of the mantle which the Lord had ordained?* Let's see what happened next:

The Word tells us that Elijah took his cloak, and struck the water with it. **"The water divided to the right and left, and they crossed over to dry ground."** While this seems to reenact the Exodus story; it is quite the opposite. In this case, Elijah and Elisha **left** the Promised Land and returned to the **wilderness** so that Elijah could test his successor before departing. He asked Elisha, **"Tell me what I can do for you before I am taken from you?"** The young man responded: **"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit."** Elisha wasn't on a power trip here, and he wasn't trying to outdo his mentor. A "double portion" in biblical times, referred to the inheritance promised to a man's eldest son. By asking for a double portion of the old man's spirit, Elisha claimed his rightful role as Elijah's successor. He had accepted the passing of the mantle which God had offered to him.

And so it was time for the final act of ordination. The Lord took Elijah to heaven in the whirlwind, and the young man's witnessing of this majestic act confirmed that Elijah's spirit was indeed upon him. It was his time now to serve in the sacred role of the prophet of Israel.

The passing of the mantle is a powerful moment in the life of God's servants. The day of my ordination and installation at New Providence was one of my greatest joys; yet, like Elisha, I stood in awe of the call that God had placed before me. I had heard of the wonderful ministries of my successors, and wondered how this new kid on the block could ever fill their shoes. **How could a call that was larger than life and beyond my own wisdom, abilities, and talents ever come to fruition?** Then I remembered that God had

passed the mantle to me in His strength not my own. God called me here with the promise to lead the congregation and me in a sacred partnership to carry out New Providence's mission to witness Christ's love in our homes, community, and world. And I praise the Lord that this partnership is well underway, and I wait with awe to see what the Lord has in store for us in the years ahead.

I suspect that Elisha had some of these same doubts and insecurities. Yet, let us look at what he was able to accomplish in God's strength during his half century of service: As scholar Dennis Bratcher suggests, Elisha's work within Israel was both personal and political. As a man who was devoted to pastoral care, he frequently interceded in the ordinary events of life that brought anxiety and crisis. During his tenure he purified the water in a polluted spring, provided an antidote for poisoned stew, healed Namaan's leprosy, recovered a lost axe head from the water, and restored seized land to the family whose son he had just raised from the dead. Elisha's acts of compassion served to demonstrate God's power over all aspects of life, even nature, and death itself.

But Elisha's greatest work, according to Bratcher, was at the political level where he sought to complete Elijah's unfinished assignments: He became personally involved in the affairs of the people. He provided water to a thirsty army, prophesied the defeat of the Moabites, and gave counsel that helped to overthrow Israel's enemies. Elisha wore the prophet's mantle even onto his deathbed, where he prophesied Joash's defeat of the Syrians. The lives of

Elijah and Elisha, served as a powerful witness within the Book of Kings, showing that every part of life is subject to God's control, and that ultimately victory would always be His. This biblical reading about the passing of the mantle hits awfully close to home here at New Providence. Unlike the immediate transition from Elijah to Elisha, this congregation went through a long period of waiting and uncertainty from the time of Christopher's departure until my arrival. More recently, we have seen the changing of the mantle in other ways as well. Several ruling elders recently concluded their service on Session, and two new elders have come aboard. We have lost some of our longtime church members in the midst of denominational controversy; and our beloved organist just retired after more than 20 years of faithful service. And so, we have had to rebuild some of our ministries from scratch, including our Christian Education program and our corps of sound system volunteers. On top of these losses, we have mourned the deaths of four longtime church members in the last three months alone.

And yet, while it is natural for us to grieve and to have moments of worry in the midst of the changes and uncertainty, *the Word invites us to remember that God remains in control of every circumstance and detail in our lives,* just as He was during the time of Elijah and Elisha nearly 3000 years ago. And God's faithfulness and the work of the Holy Spirit are powerfully evident within this congregation.

It is now once again a joyous time for Christian Education at New Providence. God has raised up from among us a Christian Education chairperson, two Sunday school superintendents, six new committee members, and four new teachers. Our new "one room schoolhouse" curriculum is in place during the Sunday school hour; and children of all ages are invited to come together every week to learn about God's Word, and His teachings for our lives.

The Lord has tended to our other needs as well. We now have a full slate of sound system folks. And thanks be to God, Jesse, the gifted young man who played for us last Sunday, has agreed to become our new full time organist beginning the first week in March. He will be a strong blessing to our music ministry.

This long season of change and uncertainty has not been an easy time for this congregation. However, it has given us the privilege of witnessing God's faithfulness in action; seeing that He is always more powerful than our circumstances; and knowing that He will never allow trials or tribulation to keep this congregation from carrying out its God-given mission.

The seasons will always change, and New Providence will continue to pass the mantle from generation to generation as it has done for 266 years. Yet, in the midst of leadership changes, departures, deaths, and the passing of the years, New Providence will continue to find a continuity of divine purpose that transcends each of these.

I pray that when another 266 years have passed, New Providence will remain devoted to sharing God's love and hospitality with all who walk through our doors; to preaching and teaching God's Word with integrity and humility; to serving those in need within our community; and to witnessing Christ's message of salvation and hope in Rockbridge County, Honduras and wherever else God may lead. As long as we remain faithful to God's Word and to carrying out our church's mission, a "*double portion*" of His Spirit will always rest upon this congregation, no matter where the mantle might lay. And when God's Spirit is upon us, Christ's light will shine forth in all that we do; and the darkness shall never overcome us. Amen.