

ELIJAH'S MANTLE

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 26, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURES

As I indicated last week, we are spending several weeks this summer on the prophets, dramatic and intense figures from the Old Testament who are summonsed and serve as spokespersons for God.

Last week, we saw Elijah defeat the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in a contest of divinities on Mt. Carmel, but then flee for his life from the Queen's deadly wrath, only to encounter God in a "still, small voice" and be given a charge to anoint Elisha as his successor prophet.¹

While Elisha had been anointed, he does not yet succeed Elijah, who continues his prophetic work.² But eventually it becomes time for Elijah to be taken up to heaven and for Elisha to begin his work. This is where the text listed in the bulletin picks up.

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

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, until 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, 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.

¹ 1 Kings 18-19.

² 1 Kings 20-22 and 2 Kings 1.

I.

On June 1, 1996, I got up early in the morning and joined several hundred people on a residential street corner in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. We gathered on a beautiful, cool morning to watch the Olympic torch be carried a few miles on its 84-day journey of 17,000 miles across 42 states, beginning in Los Angeles and arriving in Atlanta for the opening ceremony of that year's Olympics. I was there to support one of the runners, who along with her family were members of the church I was serving at the time. I was amazed at how moved I was by the sight of the flame, the torch, the runner, the crowd, in the cool morning air.³ It was moving to be part of a tradition that goes back to the original games in 776 BCE and was revived in the 1928 Olympics.⁴

The Olympic torch came to mind this week when I was contemplating Elijah's mantle for this sermon.

- As we saw last Sunday, Elijah has wrought a dramatic prophetic victory on Mt. Carmel on behalf of the God of Israel over the wicked rulers King Ahab and Jezebel.⁵
- Yet that victory has been followed by the trauma of yet another death threat from Queen Jezebel, a trauma into which God speaks to Elijah in a still, small voice, to reassure him, to prop him up, to keep him going.⁶
- As seems to always work when we need propping up, God gives Elijah several tasks: He instructs Elijah to anoint two successor kings and to anoint Elisha as his successor prophet.
- Elijah carries out these anointings.
- He spots Elisha plowing with the twelfth of twelve oxen (notice the Biblical number).
- Elijah throws his mantle over Elisha.
- Elisha leaves the oxen, goes to kiss his parents farewell, returns and slaughters the oxen to provide a farewell feast for all those who have been a part of his life.⁷
- Elisha then follows Elijah into the activity of being a prophet, speaking for God into the vicissitudes of human history.

Elijah still has one more confrontation with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel before it is time for him to be ascended into heaven. He critiques of the royal couple for their theft of land from a vineyard owner named Naboth.⁸ Sometime after that final triumph is over, God decides it is time to bring Elijah back to heaven and pass the mantle of prophecy on to Elisha.⁹

As we pick the story up in the portion we read earlier, Elisha the heir comes more fully into play.

- Elisha accompanies Elijah to witness Elijah's ascension.
- As they walk together, the older prophet asks the understudy what he would like for Elijah to leave behind.
- Elisha immediately asks for a "double portion of Elijah's spirit." It sounds like a lot, but it is what the oldest sons in a Jewish family were entitled to inherit while the rest of the sons received a single portion.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1996_Summer_Olympics_torch_relay#Route. Accessed 6/24/22.

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/sports/olympics/longterm/torches/history.htm>.

⁵ I Kings 18.

⁶ I Kings 19:1-18.

⁷ I Kings 19:19-21.

⁸ I Kings 21.

⁹ 2 Kings 2.

- Elijah does not know if he can grant this, for it is up to God to determine what if any of Elijah's spiritual or prophetic power will be transferred to Elisha and when such transfer might occur. But Elijah tells Elisha that if he actually sees Elijah being transported to heaven, the double portion will be his.
- Elijah then uses his mantle to part the waters of the Jordan River so he and Elisha can cross over – just as Moses had used his staff to part the waters of the Red Sea so the people of Israel could cross from slavery into freedom.¹⁰
- When they arrive at the other side of the Jordan, Elisha sees Elijah carried off into heaven in chariots of fire.
- Elisha grasps at Elijah's clothes, and a portion of them tear off in Elisha's hand.¹¹
- Elijah's mantle falls to the ground.
- Elisha picks the mantle up, retraces his steps to the banks of the Jordan, strikes the waters with the mantle, just as Elijah had done a few minutes earlier, and crosses the Jordan, this time on his own. Elisha possess a double portion of Elijah's spirit, a torn part of Elijah's garment, Elijah's mantle, a call from God and anointing from Elijah to the office of prophet, and a willingness to accept that call.

Throughout this story, this shift of power and point of view from Elijah to Elisha, the one constant has been Elijah's mantle:

- Elijah had draped the mantle over Elisha's shoulders at his anointing.¹²
- Elijah had rolled up the mantle and used it to part the waters of the Jordan for he and Elisha to cross.
- Elijah had allowed the mantle to fall to the ground as he ascended to heaven in chariots of fire.
- Elisha had picked the mantle up and used it to part those same waters of the River Jordan as he began his work in Elijah's stead.

Like the Olympic torch, Elijah's mantle is a symbol of the heritage and calling he and Elijah share.

II.

If we step back for a few minutes and consider the events of the last few days news cycle – the January 6th hearings about the first storming of the Capitol since 1812, the passing of the first federal legislation in thirty years in the wake of mass shootings, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* after fifty years, I think it is fair to say that much of the chaos and conflict and controversy and consternation in our nation right now has to do with the passing of mantles that define us as a nation – a passing that is perhaps as micro as one generation to the next, or as macro as one era to another.

Personally, I cannot recall at time in which I have seen curiosity and controversy about our nation's history than I have seen in recent years. As we pick up the mantle of what it means to live in this country, we are asking:

- What do basic words like liberty and justice mean?
- When was our origin? 1619? 1776? Or a bit of both?
- What did the US Constitution say when it was adopted and how has it been amended since?

¹⁰ See Exodus 14:15, 21.

¹¹ While the NRSV sees this as Elisha tearing his own clothes, Robert Alter translates that Elisha "had clung to [Elisha's] garments and torn them in two." Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 737.

¹² I Kings 19:19.

- What rulings have altered the course of history with their differing interpretations of words that have not been altered, and when have rulings been replaced by later rulings?

As we continue to live in the wake of changes in our understanding or at least public discussion of human sexuality, we ask:

- What defines us as men or women? As male or female?
- What defines us as human beings?
- And for people of faith: Who defines us?
- What does who defines us mean for the way we view and treat one another?

On a more personal and practical level this week:

- What will state legislatures do in light of Friday's supreme court decision?
- How will that impact our individual involvement with state and local governance, admittedly less filled with celebrity and glamour of national politics, but no less important.
- What impact will the ruling have on people we know who may have worked hard for this outcome (some over many years) and some who are devastated by it? Will we once again learn to talk to one another over these differences within the same family, the same the same workplace, the same PTA and soccer league?
- And how will we live together in a nation – and in a congregation – in which there are more than one view and a fair amount of agnosticism concerning when life begins and what moral implications follow from how we lean toward answering that question?

As we continue to deal with our nation's history and its impact on our present, we ask:

- Who determines what our children shall be taught in school, our undergraduates in college, our students of medicine and law and social work in their respective schools?
- What books will be in their libraries, in public libraries, in bookstores?

And as we face questions of policy no less impactful:

- What will the effect of inflation be, short-term and long term?
- What will we do about crime in the streets and shootings in increasingly unsafe public places?
- What will we do about racial and class disparities which seem to get worse when other crises intrude?
- Where are we two after the death of George Floyd?
- And what role will we as a nation play in terms of sympathy and response for Ukraine, for refugees seeking safety, for children starving in Afghanistan, for the dangers faced by Uyghurs nearly unnoticed in our country and others?

We are tearing ourselves apart over some of these questions, within relationships, families, marriages, workplaces, universities, schools, religious congregations. We have become habitual users of rhetorical violence, with physical violence not far behind, where we are now careful when we walk our children to school or even attend public worship. But much of what divides us has to do with the mantles from the past have we picked up, what we carry forward into the future, and perhaps most of all, who will carry them with.

The mantles don't change all that much. How we use them matters most.

Elisha inherits only a torn half of Elijah's garment and a double (though not complete) portion of Elijah's spirit. But as he picks up Elijah's mantle, he picks up Elijah's work as well, first through duplicating it, then through placing his own stamp upon it.¹³

In the passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha, God's work continues, as God ultimately determines what it is, who is called to carry it, and what its outcome will be.

III.

Nearly forty years ago I preached this text under the title of "Elijah's Retirement." The church in Houston in which I preached it had a small sanctuary, a theatre in the round. While there was a large space in the middle – known affectionately as "The Pit," there were only four rows of pews, so when I preached from one side of the Pit, I could see the faces of those even on the back row of the other side.

A man named Bill was in his usual place in the back row. Next to his wife, named Phyllis. Bill was a research chemist at Shell, whose lab was located in the neighborhood. He was quiet, shy, awkward to talk too, always standing in the corner of the narthex or fellowship hall waiting for his outgoing wife to peel herself away from the many people to whom she spoke each Sunday.

The day I preached "Elijah's Retirement," Bill greeted me at the door following the service, and I noticed his eyes were filled with tears.

"Friday was my last day at work," he said. "I'm really going to miss it, but my replacement has already started. She's younger than my daughter, fresh out of doctoral work at MIT. And she will be terrific."

Half a garment,
A double portion of the spirit,
The mantel fallen from one prophet, picked up by another:
The torch winds its way
Through cities and towns,
Villages and prairies,
Lighting the way over thousands of years.

The word and work of the Lord goes on.

Amen.

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¹³ Elisha's prophetic work is narrated throughout 2 Kings 2 through 13, when he passes away.