

"The Mantle Is Passed"
Summer Sermon Series on Elijah and Elisha
Text: II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; I Corinthians 15:1-11
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
July 15, 2007

*For I handed on to you as of first importance
what I in turn had received...I Corinthians 15:3a*

For several Sundays this summer we have been spending time in the Old Testament Books of I and II Kings, reading the lively narratives that surround the lives of the early prophets, specifically the prophets Elijah and Elisha. The sermon series will end next Sunday. I am reminded of a friend of mine who once preached a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, two words a Sunday: "I believe", "In God", "The Father"... Someone asked him about half way through the series which would last longer, the Israelites' 40 year journey in the wilderness or the sermon series. We are almost at the end of this one, but haven't we had a good time witnessing miracles large and small? We've seen ravens bringing bread and meat to a hungry man in the wilderness. We have seen the prophets of Baal defeated in great splendor. We have seen the wind and earthquake and the fire. We have had an exciting, fasten-your-seatbelt journey so far, and today is no exception. We have a chariot of fire and horses of fire. We have Elijah being swept up into heaven in a whirlwind. We have the Jordan River being parted not once but twice!

What has happened is this: Elijah has come to the end of his life and work. He is a grand old man of prophecy. He and his protégé, Elisha walk together toward the River Jordan. As Cathy read the story, I hope you noted the details – Elijah takes off his cloak, a long, flowing outside coat that covers other clothing, called a mantle. He takes that off, the symbol of his authority. He rolls it up; he strikes the water. The water parts, and the two of them cross to the other side on dry ground. Then, there is the ascension, preceded by the fiery chariot. It's all very dramatic and full of ancient images intended to evoke a sense of mysterious otherworldliness. On the one hand, the story seems as far away from us as Mars. Anybody taken a ride in a whirlwind lately? And yet, in another way, the realities revealed in the story mirror the times in which we live and the lives we live.

I think of our life together in the church, for example, in the passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha. I think of the very moving moments when Elders and Deacons come forward and kneel, and hands are placed upon them, symbolizing that leadership in our faith tradition is being entrusted to a new generation. Generation to generation, the work of the Lord goes on. Generation to generation, the word of the Lord is spoken. I wear a stole each Sunday morning as a sign of my ordained office. The stole represents what Jesus referred to in Matthew's gospel: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble and hard, and you will find rest for your soul." But I also like to think that it symbolizes Elijah's mantle. These rituals represent the bonds of tradition that hold the community of faith together across the ages.

Last week I had the delightful experience of enjoying a glass of iced tea with one of Morningside's long-time members. She and I laughed together about old stories from the 50s and 60s in the life of

this congregation. She reminded me that Morningside's long-time pastor, Dr. Van Gibson, not only preached here on Sunday morning, but had a radio show on Sunday night. People would call in and tell Dr. Gibson their problems, and he would tell them how to solve them. I thought to myself, "Lord, would I like to have a radio show like that!"

I love remembering the past. I love looking forward to the future. Next Sunday, we are going to baptize three little boys, welcoming them officially in to the household of God. The story goes on. The work goes on, generation to generation.

In its original context, the dramatic story of Elijah and Elisha, the river's parting, and the chariots of fire was told to reassure the faith community that in every generation and in every age, God's voice will be heard. God will never be left without a witness. After Elijah, who spoke the truth to power comes Elisha, who will do the same. And he will not do it by himself. First, there was Elijah alone and now there is Elisha, along with a whole company of 50 other prophets, who have the responsibility to call the people back to God and to remind the people and their leaders of the alternative reality of God, marked by justice and righteousness.

I cannot think of a word that is more abused today than the word "prophecy". If you hear someone say, "Sisters and Brothers, I am here to prophesy to you," you just say, "Excuse me. I have another appointment!" I Googled the word "prophecy" on Friday and nuttiness leapt off my computer screen. What chilling predictions! The end of the world cannot come too soon for some people! But the prophets of the Bible were more interested in life in this world, in what was happening then and there. They called people back to faithfulness. Those who had been entrusted with political leadership were called to righteousness. The people who had decided that religion was there to serve them, rather than being the means by which they could serve God, were called to repentance. The prophets spoke against everything that separated people from God and from one another. They spoke for the poor and the oppressed and the disenfranchised. (1) Their reason for being was to give voice to the truth of God. They offered a vision of another way to live and treat one another besides being self-serving and self-absorbed. The people of God have always needed prophets, because the faith community is no less prone to sin than anyone else. The people of God have also had the God-given responsibility to fill the prophetic role for the sake of the society of which they are a part.

The great Jewish writer and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel once described the prophets of the Old Testament as "those who sang one octave too high. . . Others consider history from the point of view of power, judging its course in terms of history and defeat, of wealth and success, but the prophets look at history from the point of view of justice, judging its course in terms of righteousness and corruption, of compassion and violence. . ."

Elijah and Elisha, Amos and Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah – over and over again, they said that things did not have to be the way they were. "God has shown you, told you, O Mortal, what is good," the prophet Micah wrote. "And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?"

I never thought that self-righteousness or fussiness ever got anybody anywhere, but surely the Church of Jesus Christ in the year 2007 has a stewardship responsibility for the prophetic voice – at least in the form of asking the right questions and offering to help with the answers. Where is, for

example, the justice in America's healthcare system when 9 million children go without health insurance? Where is the mercy in the world's food supply when 3 billion people, half the people on the planet, live on less than \$2 a day? Where is the humility in a policy of war that fails to find a way to end the bloodshed?

I believe that Jesus meant for the church to proclaim truth to power and to embody and proclaim an alternative way. "You are the salt of the earth," he said. "But if the salt has lost its savor, how can it be restored?" It's no longer good for anything. . . ." (Matthew 5:13) The mantle has been placed on our shoulders, as Elijah's mantle was placed on Elisha's shoulders.

Did you notice in the passage from I Corinthians, how careful Paul is to say that what he has to share has come to him from others, and that as he shares it, those who receive it are to pass it along? From age to age, because God will have a witness. I love this story in the Old Testament and I love the passage in Corinthians, because they remind of the divine plan that encompasses all of human history.

I love the story of the two prophets because of its personal aspects as well. Did you notice how the younger man stubbornly refuses to leave the older man, though the older one insists that he do so? "Stay here!" Elijah says to Elisha.

Every time he says it, Elisha says, "As the Lord lives and as you live, I am not going to leave you." Period. I am with you all the way. There is no more beautiful human posture than loyalty. There is a great deal to be said for someone who will go with you all the way. All the way, even if the journey is long and confusing, as this one was. Even if the outcome is going to be a final goodbye, I am going with you all the way. I don't know why Elijah kept saying to the younger one, "Don't go any farther with me," but after awhile he realized he wasn't going to get his way, so they went on together. Elisha asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit, just as the eldest son would inherit twice as much as the younger sons in a family. We'll worry about the younger sons and all the poor daughters later, (Speaking of justice!), but the point here is that Elisha is not asking for material property or for monetary gain. He is wanting power to serve God.

As the whirlwind carries Elijah into heaven, Elisha cries out, "Father, father." He grasps his clothes and tears them to pieces as a sign of his grief. Then he picks up the mantle of his beloved Elijah and finds that he is able to perform a miracle with it himself. The narrator shows us Elisha parting the water with the cloak, but he does not show us what is perhaps the most poignant part of the story, which likely took place when he put the cloak on to wear.

I remember how it was a few days after my father died. My husband, and my brother and I took on the task of sorting through his things. The hardest part was when we came to the closet where his suits and sport coats hung. I took one of his jackets off the hanger; I held it to my nose. It smelled like my daddy. That was when I missed him the most.

Elisha has no time to linger with his sadness. He puts on Elijah's cloak and off he goes. The company of the prophets has come out to meet him. They bow on the ground before him. The next chapter of prophetic ministry commences. Here's one of the glories of human existence. Each one of us is unique. There is no one who has been like us or will ever be like us. There is something we are put on earth to do that only we can do. But here's the other glorious thing about human

existence. We are a part of a larger story, a continuum of hope and faith, a continuum that began before we were born and will exist long after we are gone.

I love a story I came across in a magazine some years ago. It is a personal account by a college professor. He describes sitting late one summer afternoon out on the porch with his daughters. "There had been a storm. Dark clouds, thunder, wind and rain. The trees had swayed and snapped. But then, after the storm, peace. My daughters and I waited for the storm to pass. And then for the first time in years, we sat outside at night and soaked up the soft cool breeze that timidly followed in the wake of the storm. We sang songs and argued about religion. We told each other stories. They were mostly about family members long dead, the kind of thing scholars call 'oral history'. My daughters especially enjoyed hearing about their great-uncle Goob Talley, who is entirely bald, but who had three hairs that grew over his left ear, and he combed them all the way from the left side to the right. There in the soft light of the evening, I saw something of my father's features in my daughters' faces and I realized that I was the bridge between his yesterday and their tomorrow. And I thought to myself, if this is all my life has stood for then it would have been more than enough. Life is very good."

A wonderful man named Oscar Romero, a Roman Catholic priest, was murdered while he was serving communion to his parish in El Salvador. He had been a prophetic voice, speaking up for civil rights and human rights. In a homily just before his death, he said, "It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. . . We are workers, not master builders. Ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future that is not our own."

The future belongs to God.

What a word of hope from these ancient stories. What fresh encouragement for this very day. Amen.

(1) Dennis Bratcher, "Prophets Today?"