

## Passing the Mantle

*A Sermon by the Rev. Jim Kitchens*

*Based on 2 Kings 2:1-5, 9-15*

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*First Presbyterian Church, Salem, OR*

I chose to reflect on this passage out of 2 Kings this morning – even though it has nothing to do with the lectionary – because it is a story about its own sort of season of preparation for the resurrection in the history of the relationship between generations in God’s realm: between the dying prophet Elijah, who is reaching the end, and the young prophet Elisha, who is only now coming into his own as a prophet.

The passage marks the end of a long arc of relationship between Elijah and Elisha that begins in the early chapters of 1 Kings and continues through to this story about Elijah’s departure.

It tells a story of the relationship between mentor and mentee – of old master and young protégé – and of how they pass the baton of ministry between them. It’s a story that recognizes there are both similarities **and** differences between the way the two men will act out their role as prophet. It points toward the discontinuities between the cultural context in which each is called to serve.

It’s a story that’s a lot like the one being told in churches all over America today, as Boomers and the forms of church they have long known and loved march off into the sunset and GenXers and Millennials step up to take the reins, announcing that they will follow Jesus in their own way, a way that looks different from that of the generation who preceded them.

The setup for this story stretches all the way back to the beginning of Elijah’s and Elisha’s relationship in 1 Kings, an opening narrative that resonates with echoes of Eli’s anointing of Samuel. Elisha is out plowing the fields with 12 teams of oxen, which must have been strenuous work. He was completely focused on coaxing these oxen into plowing a straight furrow when Elijah comes upon him (I like to imagine that he sneaks up on him from behind) and tosses his mantle over Elisha’s shoulders. As soon as that mantle alights on Elisha’s shoulders he knows that Yahweh has called him to become a prophet. And just as when the disciples whom Jesus later calls, Elisha drops everything, kisses his mother and father goodbye, and trots off down the road behind Elijah.

Fast forwarding to the end of this long saga, we see a strapping Elisha trailing respectfully behind a tired, ragged, and aging Elijah. Everyone knew the end was drawing nigh. Elijah wasn't sure what the end was going to look like, but he knew his time as prophet in Israel was rapidly drawing to a close. He keeps trying to get Elisha to stay behind while he moves on out beyond him and without him. The community knows that Elisha's mentor is about to leave – no, be taken away – and they don't have any problem telling Elisha so. Elisha, inside himself, also knows everything is about to change.

I think that's why he keeps telling the community of prophets to shut up. He knows the end is near. He knows his mentor is about to die. But he loves the man and doesn't want to let him go. He loves the past they shared and he doesn't want to let the past go. He doesn't want to acknowledge what – deep in his heart – he already knows is true: everything is about to change. That's why each time Elijah tells him to stay behind, Elisha stubbornly resists. He wants to keep his mentor with him. "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live," he cries out, "I will not leave you." What his **heart** is crying out is, "I don't want **you** to leave **me**."

What happens next is pretty strange and amazing, and I'm not even talking about the fiery chariot and the flaming horses part. It turns out that for the mantle of prophecy to be handed from one generation to the next, they both have to enter a liminal space – a "time out of time" – in order for the baton to be passed.

Just before the end, Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan River from west to east, stepping **out** of Israel and back into the wilderness of Jordan. As is the case with Jesus' temptations in the gospels, it is only in such a "thin" wilderness place that the older generation can dream the dream of letting go and the younger generation can dream its corresponding dream about picking up the mantle that is about to fall to the earth.

In this liminal space, Elijah turns to an Elisha who has, over the years, become his partner, his equal, his colleague in prophecy, and asks him what final blessing the younger man would like to receive. He wants to pronounce a benediction – literally a "good word" – upon his younger comrade. Although the text doesn't tell us this, I like to think that Elijah wrapped his mantle around Elisha's shoulders one last time as he asks him the question.

Elisha asks what apparently was a hard thing: "Give me a double portion of your spirit." While we don't know exactly what those words meant to either man, one thing

seems clear: Elisha already sensed that **his** ministry as prophet of Israel was going to be more difficult, more complex, more daunting than it had been for his mentor. As they try to continue walking together, not ready to let go of one another they realize they are being separated as if by a great wall of fire. The mentor departs, and the blessing is passed on to the next generation. The mantle falls to the ground, but Elisha knows it is his to pick up. It's the same mantle and yet Elisha realizes in a flash that everything – everything – is going to be different from this moment on.

Notice what happens next. With Elijah's worn mantle in tow, Elisha walks back to the edge of the Jordan River. In one sense, he knows he is simply getting set to re-enter Israel. But in another – and strangely compelling – sense, Elisha knows that the Israel he enters will not be anything like the Israel he left only hours before. An older generation has passed on. He and his generation will now have to bear the responsibility of being the people of God for their own time and in their own context.

Raising the mantle above his head, Elisha slaps the edge of the Jordan with it and cries out, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" He does NOT say, "In the name of Elijah, I command these waters to part!" He does not turn to Elijah or to Elijah's ways in order to figure out how to proceed. Instead, he calls upon the name of the Lord. He knows that he and his generation are going to have to figure out their own way in the world, relying on the guidance and grace of God to propel them forward in hope and in faithfulness.

The waters part. Elisha walks across the dry river bed. The community of prophets on the other side recognize him as a true prophet. Elisha's ministry begins. His generation's ministry begins. The life of Israel is renewed.

This congregation is gathered at the edge of the Jordan River this morning. You know something is about to change in a major way. Boomer Christians and church leaders are nearing the end of their journey. We Boomers have commanded the culture's and the church's attention for more than 50 years. Churches were built to our specifications and ministries were launched to meet our needs. The arc of our ministries has been so long that we have even convinced ourselves that **our** way of seeing the world and **our** way of thinking about church "is the way it's always been."

The truth, of course, is that that has never been the case, and more and more of us are awakening to that realization. We realize every generation has to understand the gospel's call in its own terms and embody gospel values in ways that make sense for them and their generational colleagues. Those of us who are older realize it is time for

us to pass on the mantle of ministry, and those of us who are younger already know we will wear that mantle differently than those who went before us.

Together, we are all standing in that liminal space where one generation yields to another, one way of being in the world gives way to another, one way of following Jesus is transformed and becomes another way of following altogether.

Another way of saying that we find ourselves in a liminal space – a more clearly biblical one – is to acknowledge that we are standing on holy ground. It is in times like this when we can most clearly recognize the presence of the living God in our midst and when everyone – the generation letting go and the generations picking up – know deep in their hearts that everything is going to be just fine.

Share the mantle. Pass the baton. The church will be renewed. Amen.