

Into the Whirlwind

II Kings 2:1-12

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

In Nashville, Tennessee, a young woman named Samantha Williams produces organic pancake mix from a nutritious blend of nine-grain ingredients, all manufactured by mostly women employees who are transitioning from homelessness to stability and productivity.¹ Samantha is a Presbyterian who participated ten years ago in a program entitled Young Adult Volunteers. In fact, that was the first time she lived in Nashville. She ran a free tax preparation program for low-income people in Nashville that grew from three sites to twelve. She was so successful that the local United Way and the metro government invited her to stay an additional year at their expense.

A Nebraska native, she found a home there, and more importantly a calling, a vocation. It's about much more than what you get paid to do. She has developed and produced a healthy, sustainable product that also provides income and employment for women striving to overcome homelessness. They work out of the kitchen of Woodland Presbyterian Church. Samantha and her family attend the Second Presbyterian Church. It was her involvement in church that helped shape her sense of calling. She and her husband and their two boys are making a difference.

The Young Adult Volunteers program encourages young adults between the ages of 19 and 30 to live for a year in intentional Christian communities in one of sixteen national sites, and six international sites. In the last 25 years over 1,700 young adults have invested a year of service and a lifetime of change. Through the experience they have forged a sense of calling, some to ministry as pastors and others to ministries like the one Samantha has developed. Young Adult Volunteers provides the opportunity to discern a sense of calling and equips young people to live transformative lives, like Samantha.

In a denomination in which the median age is 62 years old, and the average age is 60, the challenge of engaging young people in relevant ways is significant. 52% of the young people surveyed between 18 and 35 years old said they dropped out of church because of “some sort of religious, ethical, or political beliefs.”² To reverse this exodus of young

1 Mitchell, Rosemary “Following God’s Call” (Mission Crossroads: Presbyterian Mission Agency Spring 2018) p. 1.

2 Rainer, Sam and Thom, Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts.

people from the church, what are we prepared to do? Can we do more to ensure that little Abigail, who we baptized this morning, finds this church to be a place where she can explore her God-given talents and find a way to invest herself in transforming her world as the Lord intends? We provide Sunday school classes and mission adventures and confirmation and even opportunities for college students and seminary interns to explore their calling. But we may need to do more than we are doing now if we intend to stay relevant for a generation that wants to do more than simply give to charity. They want to make a real difference in their world by the way they live, by what they eat, and by how they spend their time. What if we established a Young Adult Volunteers site in LA?

Every generation has the challenge of planning for succession. How do we hand over the keys to the next generation to drive the church and the world forward? In the past decade I've heard of the "failure to launch" in describing some young people, and "the lost boys" describing the plight of some young men trying to find their way in the world. Our text today tells the story of one young man who succeeded another, a great man with big shoes to fill. It is a text that transitions the season of Epiphany to the season of Lent. Elisha has an epiphany, a vision of light in the midst of the whirlwind of life. The crisis faced during the transition of leadership from one generation to another. There is enormous anxiety about the "successor." Will he have the authority and power needed for the task ahead?

Franklin Roosevelt had to work at persuading Harry Truman to be his running mate in 1944's presidential election. Truman preferred to serve in the Senate. But the incumbent Vice President, Henry Wallace, was unpopular. With reluctance Truman accepted the position. On April 12, 1945 Truman was summoned to the White House. He was ushered into Eleanor Roosevelt's sitting room where she informed him that the President was dead. After a moment of stunned silence, Truman asked Mrs. Roosevelt, "Is there anything I can do for you?" She shook her head, "Is there anything we can do for you?" she said, "for you are the one in trouble now!" Leadership passed in that sitting room that day. Harry Truman became President of the United States, an unexpected development at a critical time in history. He may not have wanted the job, but it fell to him to shoulder the responsibility.

When leadership passes will we be found faithful? We may not seek it nor do we want it but, if we should walk away from our responsibilities, something of enormous value will be lost. Individually we all must learn to shoulder our own pack, to face our responsibilities. And each generation must take up the mantel of leadership and carry forward the great ideas and commitments of the past or watch them fall into disuse and disrepair. Every one of us who has buried our parents knows the challenge of facing death and the responsibility of trying to set up our children and grandchildren for success with shouldering the responsibilities of life. It is a whirlwind, but sometimes the Lord speaks in the whirlwind.

Elijah, the great prophet of the Northern Kingdom, challenged Kings and Queens. He was rough-hewn, an outdoorsman, capable of sustaining deprivation and discomfort, firm in his beliefs and never without an opinion. Elijah was the prophet many thought had returned in John the Baptist; Elijah was the prophet that the disciples saw standing with Moses and Jesus at the transfiguration; Elijah is the prophet that the Jews open the door for during Passover, and pour a glass of wine in the hopes that he will return. Even the great Elijah had to hand over the work of the Lord to another. Elisha. The work was not finished when he came to the end of his life, there was more yet to do.

In the case of Elijah, it was left to Elisha to take up the task of his mentor and to press forward the agenda of the prophet of God. Elisha crossed over, from boy to man, from student to teacher, from novice to expert, from follower to leader. Many of us know what it is to “cross over.” We became adults. We may also have discovered the rather uncomfortable experience of no longer having a generation between us and that great river crossing known as death. We may have said goodbye to a spouse and found ourselves doing things we never had to do before. We may have been catapulted into leadership by events no one could have predicted. Rarely do we feel qualified or prepared for the responsibility. John Calvin commented that the providence of God “put him in the game.” Maybe that is what Samantha Williams experienced: Being “put in the game.”

What boundary are you crossing in life? What whirlwind are you in this morning? Are you prepared to carry forward any great idea or commitment from the past, to ensure it does not fall into disuse? Every one of us should be concerned about the next generation.

Every one of us can help to prevent “failure to launch” and “the lost boys” by encouraging our children and grandchildren, by identifying their gifts and talents, helping them to develop their abilities, and by giving them something to live for other than their own selfish ambitions and self-centered goals. If we have not given them something worth dying for, I’m not sure we have given them something worth living for. That is what they should receive here, an introduction to a much larger world where God is active in Jesus Christ to redeem life from self-seeking to building real community; caring for others, helping generational transitions, and making a difference in the world, even if it is just in your own church family and surrounding community.

What great unfinished work are you dedicated to advancing today? What sacrifice are you prepared to make for the next generation? I hope you are determined to leave a legacy of a life well lived, supporting that which leads to life for others, and dedicated to serving the Lord who is the author and sustainer of all life. We have unfinished work in the midst of the whirlwind of life. But I’m confident the Lord will meet us in the whirlwind and help us to “get in the game” and make a difference for the sake of those who will follow us.

