

Sermon 6 29 & 30 19

I love the picture on the front of our program today. It's Elijah's mantle - his cloak. You've all probably heard about "passing the mantle." It means handing over the responsibilities of an important job, from the person who had the job to the person who is replacing them. The phrase actually comes from our first reading - from Elijah passing his responsibilities on to Elisha.

But the Bible doesn't quite put it like that, does it? Our Old Testament reading tells of the mantle falling and Elisha picking it up. The mantle wasn't just passed on. It fell. And Elisha *decided* to pick it up. Here in our picture we can see it ever so gently falling, almost floating, floating down to land on ?

As you know from our reading, Elisha was traveling with Elijah. Elijah was Elisha's mentor, his teacher as well as his companion and friend.

Our reading is very dramatic. Elijah and Elisha are followed by a group of fifty prophets. These prophets keep their distance from them. They don't want to get too close! I wonder why not? In the verses that are cut from our reading today, these prophets repeatedly ask Elisha if he knows that today God is going to take his Master away from him? And Elisha answers them, "Yes, I know. Be silent." I think he means, "Let things work out as they are supposed to - let God do what God's going to do."

What are these “prophets” afraid of? Why do they keep their distance? More to the point, what is Elisha *not* afraid of? Why does he silence those prophets?

I think it’s safe to assume that when God sweeps somebody up, it’s not a casual event. It’s probably a pretty big deal. I think those additional prophets were fearful. They wanted all the glory and glamor of being a prophet, but none of the work, none of the danger. Were they really prophets? Probably on some surface, minimal-investment level. Their ability as prophets probably went as far as their commitment to prophecy took them. They clung together in a safe, anonymous crowd. Remember, prophecy is not so much about telling the future; it’s about telling the truth. The truth is rarely popular. These were “fair-weather” prophets at best.

Then Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before he leaves him. This is not a casual question. This is a “What sort of legacy do you want from me?” question. It was a great question. And Elisha responded with a *great* answer. “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” Wow! A double share of Elijah’s spirit!

Talk about the gift that would keep on giving! That would last Elisha’s whole life and beyond! “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.”

Elijah answered him truthfully.

“You have asked a hard thing.” You see, that really wouldn’t be Elijah’s gift to grant. That would be up to God. So he answered, “If you can see me as I’m being taken from you, it will be granted. If not, it will not.” Pretty straightforward. But that’s why, as Elisha watched Elijah being taken up in the fiery chariot, he shouted out a play-by-play description. He could see it! And he was letting Elijah know!

And then Elijah’s mantle fell. Slowly drifted down from the fiery chariot to land near Elisha. It came to him. There was no one else there. It was passed on to him. *If he chose to pick it up.* We always have a choice. Elisha had to be willing to pick it up. And he was. Elisha took Elijah’s responsibilities onto himself. He took on the role of prophet.

The 50 fair-weather prophets didn’t get the mantle. No. The one who had the courage to ask for a double share of the prophet’s spirit got it.

So Elisha lived and worked fearlessly as a prophet. He purified the waters of Jericho. Despite the tendencies of the people around him to worship the gods that were convenient and not the God of Israel, he continually reminded the people of *their* God, the God of the Israelites.

Elisha became known as a patriot, because he helped the soldiers and kings of Israel. He was known for his bold, straight talk with rulers and his kindness towards the lowly.

Elisha accepted his role. He picked up the mantle and he was able to use it to work miracles. He was God's choice, certainly, but he was God's choice because he put himself in the position to be God's choice. The mantle fell and he was there. The rest of those so-called prophets were across the river! They couldn't reach it. He could. He did. I don't think he could have chosen to dodge the mantle mainly because he just wouldn't have. Besides, if the mantle is meant to fall on you, it will.

Those who are called to speak the truth are usually not those who go looking for the job. It comes to them, as if the truth itself chooses its voice. Most of the Bible's prophets were reluctant, but once chosen, they embraced their call. They became single-minded and devoted to their call. They didn't try to dodge the mantle.

Our gospel tells us that as Jesus drew closer and closer to the crucifixion, he began to adopt a single mindedness, very much like Elijah and Elisha. His face was "set" toward Jerusalem. People volunteered to go with him, but they all had excuses for delaying, and he couldn't go for that. Also, he seemed to know that most of those who followed him wouldn't be able to follow him all the way to Golgotha, to crucifixion. He had many followers who just dropped

away, sloughing off like dead skin, unable to follow him to the very end.

His final messages to them, however, were filled with love and understanding - “go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” He could see ahead to what they could not see. He could see beyond the crucifixion and even beyond the resurrection. “Go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

And that’s what he says to all of us. It still comes down to us, simply and directly, two thousand years later, beyond the crucifixion and beyond the resurrection, and even beyond his ascension. His words are as fresh as the first moment he uttered them, “Go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Accept the mantle and put it on.

“Go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”