

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Mission Trip Commissioning/Senior Recognition Sunday  
June 27, 2010

## Receiving the Mantle

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

In these early summer months,  
the lectionary gives us the stories of the great prophets  
Elijah and Elisha,  
men of God who spoke the Word of God in troubled times.

Today's story, at the opening of the book of 2 Kings,  
finds Elijah at the end of his ministry.

He has just prophesied the death of Israel's King Ahaziah.  
Ahaziah's was a sort of Humpty-Dumpty story.  
The King falls through a lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria,  
but instead of seeking help and healing from the Lord  
he sends his men to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron,  
as to whether he will live or die.  
When Elijah the Tishbite hears of this  
he prophesies that King Ahaziah will surely die.  
So the King sends out his soldiers, 50 at a time,  
to try to bring Elijah in and silence his prophesies.  
And 50 at a time, the king's men are killed by the fire of God  
which comes down from heaven and consumes them.  
Until finally, one of the captains falls to his knees before Elijah  
and pleads the prophet for his life and the lives of his 50 men.  
God tells Elijah to go with this captain to King Ahaziah.  
So Elijah goes and tells the King in person that he is going to die.  
So, 2 Kings promptly reports, *he died*  
*according to the word of the Lord Elijah had spoken.*

All the king's horses and all the king's men were not enough to put  
King Ahaziah back together again.

The king could not silence the prophet  
because the prophet spoke the word of the Lord.  
Not a happy story and not a happy time for Israel.

But then the scene shifts.

As often happens in the Book of Kings,  
"the text leaves the scene of royal failure and disaster  
to take us to a scene alive with the news of a new divine initiative.  
...God continues to put into play  
initiatives that can break open patterns of defeat and disappointment."<sup>i</sup>

When in the pain of disappointment and the agony of defeat,  
do not despair.

God is always doing a new thing.

(By the way, note to Jessica and Kelsey and to this year's Confirmation Class:  
this little bit of good news is very nicely and simply expressed  
in your *Life-with-God Bibles*, in the notes for this reading.

So while it's true that those Bibles look kind of cool and leathery on the outside  
they are even cooler, and filled with life, on the inside.

So don't just look at them on the shelf; open them up and READ them!)

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The new thing that God is doing here involves a the harvesting of a seed  
Elijah had planted years earlier in the person of Elisha, his disciple.  
Somehow Elijah and Elisha know that God is about to take Elijah away,  
and so Elisha will not leave his master's side.

Now, Elijah is wearing a mantle, as I shared with the kids earlier.

It is a symbol of his status as a prophet of the Lord God of Israel.

And Elijah takes off his mantle and strikes the water of the Jordan River  
causing the waters to part to the one side and the other,  
so that he and Elisha can cross over on dry ground.

The parting of waters has become the quintessential sign for Israel  
that God is with them:

at the Exodus, through Moses and his staff,  
God parts the waters of the Red Sea  
to lead the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and into new life,  
and through Joshua,

God parts the waters of the Jordan  
to lead the people of Israel into the new life of the promised land.

So through Elijah and his mantle, God parts the waters and they cross over.

And Elisha, anticipating that he's about to be on his own in this prophetic venture,  
asks Elijah for a parting gift: a double share of his spirit,  
to which Elijah replies, basically,

that it's up to God what sort of power he'll be given.

If you see me taken up, then your wish will be granted.

So the chariot of fire comes and separates the two men of God,  
and Elijah ascends to heaven in a whirlwind.

And Elisha sees it all.

But Elijah leaves something behind: his mantle.

That is, his spirit and his power, the power given to him by God.

As if to test it out, to see if this mantle, this spirit, is for real,

Elisha tries the same trick he'd just seen his master perform,  
striking the waters of the Jordan River,

and sure enough, the waters of the Jordan part.

But Elisha asks an all-important question when he takes up the mantle of Elijah:

*Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?*

This question reveals Elisha's humility about his new role as Elijah's successor.

He knows that

if he is to speak the word of the Lord,  
or perform the mighty works of the Lord,  
it will have nothing to do with his own power,  
or any magical object like this mantle.

Elisha knows it is not the man or his mantle,

but the Lord God who accomplishes all things.

The power belongs to God, and will flow through Elisha as God chooses,  
and as Elisha makes himself open and available to God.

Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

Elisha receives his answer as the waters part:

I am here with you.

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And our question is the same today, as we seek to live as the servants of the Lord.

Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

In Jesus Christ we see and hear the answer:

I am right here with you.

Keep watch, and see what I am doing.

To our mission teams today, this good news is a comfort and a challenge.

In the work we are going out to do,

whether on the streets of Philadelphia,  
or around Western PA through Camp Crestfield,  
or down South in the mountains of North Carolina,  
the Lord is with us, and is going to be at work.

Our joyous responsibility is to keep our eyes open to see what God is doing  
and then to find a way to step in and participate.

And how do we know what God is doing?

The Apostle Paul helps us answer that question today,  
in his letter to the Galatians.

There are certain attitudes and activities that we may encounter  
that are NOT the work of the Spirit.

These Paul calls the works of the flesh, and they are obvious, he says:

*fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery...drunkenness, carousing...*

[you're doing okay so far right - no problem -

not planning on doing any of these on the mission trips. But keep listening...]

*enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy...*

*and things like these...*

[these are things that might be experienced on a mission trip].

*I am warning you, says Paul, as I warned you before:  
those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is  
love, joy, peace,  
patience, kindness, generosity,  
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,  
against such there is no law.*

If you have not committed the fruits of the spirit to memory,  
it is not a bad list to keep in your mind,  
as a way of searching your heart,  
or the heart of your common life with other believers.

Today, in a few moments,  
each participant in one of GPC's summer mission teams  
will come forward and sign a covenant that says essentially this:  
I believe God will be at work in the work I do this summer,  
and I commit myself to that work  
and to do all things according to the Spirit,  
bearing the fruit of the Spirit in my life.

And after signing this covenant,  
in the presence of God and these witnesses,  
each one will come to the center of the chancel,  
stand before the cross and the communion table and the baptismal font,  
and receive a red mantle as a sign of the Holy Spirit,  
the Spirit of Elijah, the presence of the Lord God of Elijah,  
the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ.

And my charge to each of us who receive this mantle  
is to go out this summer asking the question:  
*Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah,*  
and on hearing the answer,  
to go and share in God's work.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rebecca J. Kruger Gaudino, *2 Kings* notes in *The Life-with-God Bible* (New York: Harper One), p. 534