

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 2:1-14

During the time when kings ruled ancient Israel, men called prophets became the spiritual leaders of the people. Elijah, a forceful leader of several communities of prophets, seemed to have a direct experience of God. Prophets like Elijah would remind the people of Israel of the power of God, and they would even interpret God's will to the king. Elijah had called Elisha as his servant and disciple, and in this story Elisha follows his mentor on a goodbye tour.

SERMON: "A Share of Your Spirit"

Prayer: Lord, touch my mouth as I speak, touch our ears as we listen, touch our hearts as we seek to understand and obey your word for us today. Amen.

The story we just read tells about leadership passing from old Elijah to young Elisha; it also tells about Elijah's miraculous transition into heaven. And it tells of the movement of the gifts of Elijah's spirit to his young successor.

The phrase we use to describe a transition of leadership is to "take up the mantle." That phrase finds its roots in this very story.

In the ancient world a mantle was a piece of cloth, something like a cloak or a poncho. Elijah's mantle was first mentioned in the reading from the nineteenth chapter of 1 Kings, which was the scripture reading we heard last Sunday. After Elijah fled from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel he went into hiding for 40 days in the wilderness. There he climbed to the top of Mt. Horeb, the mountain where God had given the Ten Commandments to Moses. While Elijah was hiding in a cave, the Lord God spoke to him in a still, small voice – in profound silence.

In that story, the moment that Elijah heard the voice of the Lord God speaking, he "wrapped his face in his mantle" (verse 13) as he stepped out of the cave in order to stand before the presence of God; and the Lord God told Elijah that there were going to be changes coming. Elijah's role in facilitating this change was to bring Elisha on board with him and anoint him as his successor.

Elijah climbed back down from the mountain and traveled to where he found Elisha plowing a field with twelve yoke of oxen. As he passed by Elisha, Elijah cast upon him that very same mantle that had been in the holy presence of God. After Elijah did this, Elisha began to travel with Elijah and learn from him. Elijah became his spiritual father.

Today we read that the day had arrived when the Lord was going to take Elijah up to heaven and the transition of leadership would be complete. The two men, Elijah and Elisha, started out that day at Bethel. This is the holy place where many years before Jacob had a vision of angels coming down a ladder from heaven and promising that a whole nation would be born to him.

When Elijah was ready to leave Bethel, he said to Elisha, "Stay here." But Elisha said, "No, I will not leave you." At that moment, the prophet of Bethel came up and said to Elisha, "The Lord is going to take away your leader today." And Elisha said, "Yes, I know, don't speak of it."

Then Elisha followed Elijah to Jericho, where Elijah said, “Now, Elisha, you stay at Jericho.” But Elisha said, “No, I will follow you just as long as you are on this earth.” And the Jericho prophets came running up and said, “Elisha, you know the Lord is going to take away your leader today, don’t you?” And Elisha said, “Yes, I know, don’t speak of it.”

After that, Elijah and Elisha came to the Jordan River, and Elijah said, “I am about to cross over the Jordan. You stay here.” And Elisha said, “No, I’m going with you until the very end.” So Elijah took off his mantle and rolled it up and struck the waters of the River Jordan, and the water stopped flowing and parted so the two of them could walk across on dry land.

And then Elisha asked, “When you leave this earth, I want to inherit a double share of your Spirit.” Elijah said, “I don’t know if that can happen. But if the Lord lets you see me being taken up to heaven, then you will know that what you have asked will be granted.”

As they were walking along and talking suddenly there was a great flash of light in the sky, and a chariot and horses of fire came between them, and Elijah was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha cried out, “I see you! I see the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” And Elijah disappeared into heaven.

Elisha tore his own clothes as a sign of his grief, and he took up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen to the earth. He went and stood by the River Jordan for a while. Finally, he rolled up the mantle and struck the water with it as he had seen Elijah do, and the river was parted so that he could walk back across. Elisha was now the leader of the prophets of Israel.

This story is full of so many symbols. The two prophets by the power of God crossed the river on dry land just as Moses and the people of Israel had done centuries before. The chariot of fire and the horsemen were reminders of the military might that God had given Israel. For enslaved African-Americans the chariot of fire became a symbol of their longed-for transition to a heavenly home, so they created the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, coming for to carry me home.”

Last Sunday, after Coffee Hour, when we had eaten delicious cake and had a chance to talk, I followed Dudley Rose and Tom Hathaway up to the office where they keep their robes. Dudley was taking his robes and stoles out of the closet to carry them to his car. He found a green stole that he no longer needed and asked Tom if he would like to have it. Of course Tom said that he would, and the stole was passed from Dudley to Tom. I was reminded of Elijah’s mantle being passed; it was a moment of great meaning.

That is the thing about these stories from the scripture. They describe events of great and often profound meaning. Things like facing your own death, (as Elijah did) or making transitions in spiritual leadership (from Elijah to Elisha, or from Dudley to Tom), or experiencing the power of God in a vision in the sky (the chariot of fire and the horsemen.)

From time to time we experience events that shake us up or change our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Sometimes these events provide an opening where God can speak to our souls. When have you experienced an event of great meaning recently? Has God spoken to you in that event?

A little more than a week ago I attended two high school graduation ceremonies. We heard the familiar “Pomp and Circumstance” music while a long procession of education leaders, teachers and then graduating seniors marched onto the football field to hear speeches and receive their diplomas. We heard words of encouragement to these graduating seniors: “Never forget what you learned here, or the friendships that you have made.” “Never give up on your dreams.” “You will experience failure, but do not let failure define you. Learn from your failures and move on.” (The Eagle who thought he was a chicken.)

I thought of how profound this experience of Commencement is for young people, who can never again go back to being kids in high school. That experience is past and gone; they can only move ahead now to the next phase of their lives. At some level of consciousness I recalled my own high school graduation of sixty years ago, when I was so eager to move ahead to the next phase of life.

I also recalled, with a lump in my throat, what it felt like to see my daughters graduate from high school and move on. I felt a mixture of pride in their accomplishment but also sadness – the sadness of a loss. I knew that the relationship with my daughters was changing in ways that I could not control. And I knew that before long they would leave home. A major part of my parenting task had been completed, and I could not go back and redo it.

Commencement marks a major life transition for young people and their families; they are entering into a new phase of life. This congregation is also in the midst of a major life transition, moving from one season of ministry to a new season of ministry, with our former beloved pastor now retired and our new beloved pastor about to begin his term as senior pastor. Things will be different!

Whenever things change for us, it can be an exciting time, but change can also make us uneasy or sad or frustrated. We miss the leader who is no longer here. At the same time we are excited to experience the energy and gifts of our new leader. And so we ask ourselves, “How will the life and ministry of this congregation change? How will I deal with the changes?”

Before we move ahead, however, we need to acknowledge our loss. Like those bands of young prophets in ancient Israel, we have lost our long-term leader, and we need to mourn that loss. It is okay to feel sad that he is no longer with us. Dr. Dudley Rose brought many spiritual gifts to this congregation, and I will miss him, and I know that you will miss him also. His retirement is a little bit like a death for us. We won’t be seeing his familiar face or experiencing the relationship that we had with him.

In our Call to Worship this morning we recited a list of nine Gifts of God’s Holy Spirit which the Apostle Paul listed in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23). A couple of weeks ago I asked several members of this congregation which of those Gifts of the Spirit you saw in Dudley. Two of you mentioned kindness and two of you spoke of his faithfulness. You also saw these gifts that Dudley brought to us: gentleness, love, patience, self-control and joy. That last one – joy – you saw in his playfulness and humor.

Now we will no longer experience those spiritual gifts which Dudley brought to us. Some of those gifts we may see in Tom; we will experience other spiritual gifts as well that Tom brings to us. But we are a congregation of God's people, and God's spiritual gifts have been given to all of us. Some of us have been given the gift of kindness. Some of us have been given the gift of faithfulness. Others of us will continue to express in the life of this congregation gentleness, patience, love, self-control and many other gifts of the spirit. So what we have experienced in Dudley's life and ministry is not lost – rather, it is given to all of us to live those gifts.

Young prophet Elisha, knowing that his mentor was leaving him, asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit. In that culture, a double share was the amount of the father's possessions that the oldest son would inherit, so Elisha was asking to be treated like the first-born son.

Elisha had learned so much from the older man! He especially appreciated Elijah's spirit – the way Elijah experienced God directly and powerfully. And when Elijah spoke he spoke as a representative of God. He comforted the ordinary people, he challenged the prophets of Baal, and he even confronted the king and queen! Elijah's words brought about changes that established the power of God in Israel.

So losing this voice of authority was extremely hard for Elisha and all the companies of prophets. And it is hard for us to lose Dudley's authoritative voice. But we have been so richly blessed to have Tom Hathaway coming on as our Senior Pastor. I am sure that you would agree with me that in some mysterious way it is God who has chosen Tom be our pastor at this time. I imagine that this new season of ministry will be an exciting and meaningful time in the life of this congregation.

And that will be especially true if we live the Gifts of God's Spirit that God has given us. If we live love, joy and peace in our daily life; if we live patience, kindness and generosity at work or at school; and if we live faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in our life together in this congregation and community God's gifts will be shared with all those we meet.

There will always be a day when God decides that the time has come for one person, one prophet or preacher or leader, one generation or one cultural group to move off of center stage so that new actors can take their place. There comes a time when we need to let go of those who led us in the past and open our hearts and minds and spirits to the next act of the play that God has created. And may we do that with profound gratitude!

This sermon by Lawrence R. Bergstresser was preached at North Union United Church of Christ, Medford, MA on June 26, 2016.