

“If the Mantle Fits”

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June 26, 2016

Scripture:

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 (CEB)

2 Now the Lord was going to take Elijah up to heaven in a windstorm, and Elijah and Elisha were leaving Gilgal. 2 Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here, because the Lord has sent me to Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives and as you live, I won’t leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. 6 Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here, because the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives and as you live, I won’t leave you.” So both of them went on together. 7 Fifty members from the group of prophets also went along, but they stood at a distance. Both Elijah and Elisha stood beside the Jordan River. 8 Elijah then took his coat, rolled it up, and hit the water. Then the water was divided in two! Both of them crossed over on dry ground. 9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “What do you want me to do for you before I’m taken away from you?” Elisha said, “Let me have twice your spirit.” 10 Elijah said, “You’ve made a difficult request. If you can see me when I’m taken from you, then it will be yours. If you don’t see me, it won’t happen.” 11 They were walking along, talking, when suddenly a fiery chariot and fiery horses appeared and separated the two of them. Then Elijah went to heaven in a windstorm. 12 Elisha was watching, and he cried out, “Oh, my father, my father! Israel’s chariots and its riders!” When he could no longer see him, Elisha took hold of his clothes and ripped them in two. 13 Then Elisha picked up the coat that had fallen from Elijah. He went back and stood beside the banks of the Jordan River. 14 He took the coat that had fallen from Elijah and hit the water. He said, “Where is the Lord, Elijah’s God?” And when he hit the water, it divided in two! Then Elisha crossed over.

Sermon:

You know what this story reminds me of? It reminds me of every scary movie ever made where two people are in trouble, and one of them says to the other, “You stay here and I’ll go check it out.” Does the person EVER stay where they are told? No, never. Three times Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind, and all three times Elisha refuses.

When I read a story like this, it makes me wonder about the choices these biblical characters make. I'm not sure Elisha is making an informed decision. Does he really know what he is getting into when he follows Elijah? Does Elisha know the backstory?

You see, Elijah was God's prophet in Israel, the northern kingdom, about nine centuries before Jesus. The Omri dynasty, of which Ahab and his wife Jezebel are, alas, the most well-known representatives, was not a stellar time for God's people up north. It required many a prophet, not just Elijah or Elisha, to speak against the Baal worship of the wicked, or at least speak out against the weak King Ahab and his pagan wife, Jezebel.

Elijah warns Ahab that there will be years of catastrophic drought, so severe that not even dew will fall, because Ahab and his queen have done evil in the sight of the Lord. King Ahab calls Elijah the, "troubler of Israel." Elijah responds by throwing that name back at Ahab, saying that it is Ahab who has troubled Israel by allowing the worship of false gods.

As told in the Hebrew Bible, Elijah's challenge is bold and direct. Baal was the Canaanite god responsible for rain, thunder, lightning, and dew. Elijah not only challenges Baal on behalf of his own God, Yahweh, he challenges Jezebel, her priests, Ahab and the people of Israel. Well, challenging the powers that be is often not a popular thing to do, and Elijah was NOT popular with Jezebel.

Jezebel, enraged at Elijah, threatens to kill him, so Elijah flees for his life. Elijah travels for forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. There, alone in a cave, Elijah cries out to God. "I've been very passionate for You, God, because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life, too!" God responds by instructing Elijah to go and find Elisha, who will succeed Elijah, as prophet.

Did Elijah happen to mention all this to Elisha? Did Elijah tell Elisha about the death threats and the forty nights of sleeping in the wilderness? Did Elijah tell Elisha about the fear? I can only guess that Elijah left out those details when he found Elisha plowing in a field and threw his mantle over him, an implicit invitation to become Elijah's successor.

So here we are, back at the beginning of our story for today, where Elijah is setting out for Bethel. Elisha, of course, wants to go, too, and it's curious that Elijah tells him to stay behind. Commentators are not sure what Elijah and Elisha are thinking in this passage, because the text is so rich in Hebrew cultural traditions from that time frame. Why does Elijah tell Elisha to stay behind, and why does Elisha refuse? In the verse right before our lectionary passage, the text says that Elisha followed Elijah as a servant, so why didn't he obey?

We might get a clue from Elisha's request. Elisha says, "Let me have twice your spirit." Twice your spirit refers to inheritance rights. In verse 12, Elisha calls out, "Oh, my father, my father! Israel's chariots and its riders!" Somewhere along the way, Elisha has moved from being Elijah's servant to feeling more like Elijah's son, and not just any son, the first born son. The first born son always received a double portion, and this is what Elisha asks for – a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

What Elisha is asking for is twice the inheritance, not twice the power. Elisha wants to be seen as Elijah's rightful heir. Elisha doesn't want more power than Elijah, no, in this request he is linking his name with Elijah's like a family lineage. Elisha is not seeking to go and do amazing feats of power all on his own, he is seeking to follow in Elijah's footsteps and continue the work that Elijah had started.

Is there some magic in Elijah's mantle? Is it like Frosty, The Snowman's hat? Or Superman's cape? The answer is no. Elijah's mantle is the symbol, not the source, of his power.

This story is so rich in imagery, you'd think I would focus on that and explain all about the fiery chariot and fiery horses, and the theological implications of the whirlwind, but nope. I'm focused on the actions and intentions of these two prophets. So here's the thing, Elijah didn't hand his mantle to Elisha, it fell.

There are many paintings of the ascension of Elijah by artists such as Giuseppe Angeli, Gustave Doré, and Brenda Rose Wright (Cameron), the artist who painted the image shown on the cover of our bulletin today. And many of them portray the story incorrectly by depicting Elijah throwing or handing his mantle to Elisha, but the text merely says that the mantle had fallen.

Here's the thing: Elisha didn't have to pick it up. Yes, he's been following and serving Elijah, undoubtedly planning to stay with him, but all along the way, Elisha makes choices., and here is when we see his intentions clearly – Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle. When Elisha picks up the mantle, he is claiming this symbol of prophetic authority as his own.

When Elisha picks up the mantle, he has no guarantee that God will give him the same gifts that Elijah had. Remember, it was Elijah who was told to choose Elisha, but Elijah was the one who did the choosing. Elijah could have disobeyed God, but he didn't. Elijah threw his mantle over Elisha, back in that field. While God may have endorsed and supported it, the transfer of power takes place without a direct encounter between Elisha and God, so Elisha has no guarantee that he is doing the right thing.

Elisha pursues his call, with no guarantee that God will respond. Elisha follows what he understands to be God's will, although he does not know clearly what God's will for him is.

- Elisha must discern God’s will by participating in events.
 - he must watch the chariot and the whirlwind
 - he must pick up the mantle
 - he must attempt to part the Jordan

Elisha confirms his call through his actions. For the rest of his life as a prophet, as he continues to speak out boldly, as Elijah had done, against the evil kings and the false gods, Elisha makes an impact on his world. In doing this work, Elisha serves the purposes of the God who works behind the scenes of human history.

As I read this story, I was reminded of the words of Jesus after his resurrection. In John 14:12, we are told that Jesus made this startling statement to his disciples: “I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father.” Jesus, whose works included:

- healing the sick
- feeding the poor
- speaking truth to power, and
- standing up for the oppressed

Jesus tells his disciples that they will do “even greater works than these.” Greater doesn’t mean better, it means that his disciples can continue the work while Jesus must leave. Well, yay for the 12 disciples...but I’m not off the hook.

In a couple of different places in the gospels, Jesus tells us what the description of his disciples is. In John 8:31, we read: “Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him, “You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teaching.” And in John 13:35, the text tells us, “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.”

Do we want to be Jesus’ disciples? Do we want to pick up THAT mantle?? We are in the same predicament that Elisha was in. How do we know that God will work through us? What is God calling me to do in a particular situation? Like Elisha, we may have to take action in order to find out the answer to that question. I think it will help us to remember Elisha’s persistence in following Elijah, and the prospect of God’s empowerment. If we are intent on following Jesus, intent on remaining faithful to his teaching, on loving others, then we can share in the expectation of God’s empowerment, too.

Jesus left us with a huge responsibility, to speak truth to power, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and tell others about the love we have found. It is up to us, to each one of us, to make the choice – to pick up the mantle – to do the work that Jesus did.

If we don’t, who will?