

The Mantle

Mark 9:2-9; 2 Kings 2:1-13

Makemie Presbyterian Church

February 22, 2009

Mark 9: 2 - 9

{2} ...Jesus took with him Peter & James & John & led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, {3} his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. {4} And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. {5} Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses & one for Elijah." {6} He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. {7} Then a cloud overshadowed them & from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" {8} Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. {9} As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

2 Kings 2:1-13

{1} Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. {2} Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. {3} The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.” {4} Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”

So they came to Jericho. {5} The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.” {6} Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”

So the two of them went on. {7} Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they

both were standing by the Jordan. {8} Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

{9} When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you."

Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

{10} He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."

{11} As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. {12} Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. {13} He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.

This ends the reading.

I decided the other morning to go through the drive through at Taylor Bank. It was lunchtime. It was Friday. And as I sat in line I thought, this is a good time to go through the glove box. As I was going through some stuff that I carry around in the car, I came across a little woven cloth box with a golden cross on top of it—my home communion box. At some point I decided to keep one in the car so I'd have it if I needed it. You know, one of those emergency communions where people are running around looking for a Presbyterian minister.

The one I use regularly I keep in the church office. These containers are small & neat: there's a little vial for holding communion wine, & five glass cups, a little bigger than a thimble. There's a tiny brass bowl, about an inch in circumference, maybe an inch deep, and a little plate that fits on top of it so you can seal some bread bits or wafers in there & then serve them at the right time.

It looked a little more weathered than it had looked the last time I had laid eyes on it, but then I remembered: this isn't the one I keep in the office. This one belonged to my former mentor & colleague, the Rev. Lacy Harwell. He had passed on this mantle to me with the words, "As a person of Christ, Debra, you must not & can not fail."

Yikes!

There are times in everyone's life when the episode between Elijah & Elisha becomes immediately relevant: sometimes giving you a moment of graceful remembrance, but sometimes it can be a memory of melancholy or it can even be painful.

We see it in airports, bus stations, train depots: someone's inevitably leaving at some scripted time, but the person they're with absolutely can't just turn around & leave them. They're working for every possible second together before the final, wrenching farewell.

There is a scene in the Oscar winning best picture from 1985, *Out of Africa*, where the husband is going on safari & he is saying goodbye to his wife on the wide veranda of their front porch. She gives him a small peck on the cheek as her goodbye kiss & he says, "That's a fine goodbye."

To which the wife response, "I'm better at hello."

Some of us are terrible at good-byes & we work so hard to avoid them that we can appear callous. Chances are we're not callous. We just find it difficult to bear what can sometimes be the excruciating pain of stretching out the inevitable separation.

We see in the passage Ted just read, the agony of the younger

prophet as Elijah, the older one, moves on toward his destination.

When we must remain on the shore to watch the ship disappear over the horizon, well we feel left behind; and this can be a devastating feeling.

There is in our text this morning, a poignant beauty to the story of the elder prophet having completed his ministry & the younger one asking for no inheritance other than a double share of the older one's spirit.

Elijah tells the younger Elisha how he'll be able to recognize whether God has granted him that spiritual gift.

But the last image we're left with is not a spiritual gift, but a physical one. When Elisha could no longer see him, after his grieving, he picks up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him & goes back & stands on the bank of the River Jordan.

The mantle was like a robe, woven without a seam, that you would slip on over your head. Sort of like a poncho.

I think about Elisha picking up Elijah's mantle whenever a new Sunday School teacher sits down with a class, just like some grown-up once sat down with that teacher, however many years ago.

Some years ago, some of us who were ministers, pastors, &

teachers in seminaries were asked to form a group & before a large body of students & laypersons, to say who was the most influential person apart from our parents in the formation of our lives & our movement to ministry. We had two or three weeks notice, but it was a difficult matter for me. Finally, when my turn came, I stood up & gave them a name they had never heard of. I said, "Miss Eudora Jones." As children of the deep south, we called all women, "Miss." Miss Eudora Jones was an elderly woman, single. She taught me in the primary department & since there was nobody to teach us as juniors, she went right on with us & taught us for years. She gave me a Bible. She wrote in the front: "May this be a light to your feet, a lamp for your path. Eudora Jones."

She taught us to memorize the Bible; she never tried to interpret it. I don't remember her ever explaining anything.

She said, "Just put it in your heart, just put it in your heart."

She used the alphabet & we'd go around the room saying verses. A – A soft answer turns away wrath. B – Be ye kind, one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, as God also in Christ has forgiven you. C – Come unto me, all you who labor & are heavy laden. D—Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. E—

Every good & perfect gift...F—For God so loved the world...Don't worry, I'm not going to go on.

I still remember all that. She didn't explain it. We learned from the King James Bible all those verses. I had to say to those students & church people that Sunday afternoon, "I can't think of anything, anything in all my life that has made such a radical difference as those verses. The Spirit of God brings them to my mind appropriately, time & time & time, again."

And this influence of a person of God in your developing years is something that many of us share. And when someone hands on to someone else, 20, 30, even 50 years ago, is passed on again to someone else—it's not necessarily the content, or the spoken theology lessons that form the memory.

It's the commitment given when someone becomes a member of the church and finds the places where they may contribute. People who came before us did that, and now we do it in part because they did it for us in the church of their own time. The mantle of their spirit is passed on and becomes the mantle of our spirit in our own time, sometimes without even being aware of the influence we impart.

It's an ongoing example of faithfulness—the quiet acts of

helping people in such a way that the sacrifice reflects the glory back to God.

Because when Jesus took Peter & James & John to the mountaintop, we saw that this business of handing on is not just a noble endeavor. We saw a holy moment, when Jesus himself was transfigured.

But sometimes, it's not so obvious, and it's easy for our eyes to miss the transfiguration, the holy moment of epiphany.

Last year I took Jaxon & some of his pals to the Samaritan Shelter in Pocomoke.

I've referred people there before. People who have nothing to eat can go there and be fed. People who have no home in the world to go can go there and be safe.

After being shown the facility and told about how it works, the children were invited to ask questions, & I held my breath. You never know. But they asked good, insightful questions about homelessness. They weren't questions about tonnage of food wasted in this country, or how many millions of Americans are homeless, or about the average age of a homeless person—which in our community is nine & I think, nationally or worldwide is something like five years of age.

But those figures, condemning as they are of all of us who are charged with looking after each other; those figures are just data.

These children that I've known since they were two & three years old, asked questions like, "What's a typical day like for someone in this position?"

"Do they have Christmas?"

"How do they feel?"

The woman who ran the shelter had answered a thousand questions about how many homeless are served & which month is the busiest. But apparently it had been a long time since anyone had asked the question, "how do they feel?"

In this transformation however, there was no dazzling white, and the prophets of 25 centuries ago remained in their slumber.

But perhaps that moment of deep, human understanding—expressed by kids who are 9, 10, 11 years old—maybe this was one of those moments we get every now & then of transfiguration.

From God, Moses received the covenant in the form of the Law.

Later, Elijah spoke prophetically to the people who rebelled against the Law that Moses had entrusted to them.

Jesus embodied the covenant: the law & the prophecy of Israel.

Among the small group, the inner circle who were with him on the mountaintop that day, was a disciple named “Peter,” which means, “rock.”

According to Matthew, Jesus would later say, “You are Peter, & on this rock I will build my church, & the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

That’s us. After we watched him ascend into the heavens like Elijah in his chariot of fire, we carry the mantle that Jesus left behind.

The Apostle Paul said to the young church at Corinth, “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’”

See it’s carved on the front of our communion table.

Paul goes on a little later in his first letter to the Corinthians, “For I handed on to you...what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day.”

And throughout the next century, a hundred forgotten martyrs handed on the vision of the church to their followers, through their

writings & their example of faith.

In those early centuries of the church, councils were called together of the bishops of all the places where churches had been formed. Letters that Paul and others had written, & four works of a new genre called “gospel” attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke & John were formally called “scripture,” & handed on to all the generations of the Church.

The Reformers of the Middle Ages handed on to us a church reformed to be as it had been in its earliest days.

The Presbyterians, lead by our own Frances Makemie, who came to this country brought a church culture of “free thinkers” that emphasized faith & reason; God’s sovereignty & the prophets’ call for justice & righteousness; we were to be a priesthood of all believers.

Our first grade Sunday School teachers, or the pastors of the churches where we grew up, or the people who first showed us what it means to be a follower of a crucified & risen Christ; we remember them, received & handed on to us our own mantle & when we pick it up, we are transformed.

We become an Elisha, a prophet of God in our own right. We become the carriers of the mantle of all the Elijahs who came before us.

And it becomes very difficult to let Elijah go.

Maybe that's why Peter, not knowing what else to say, tossed out that cockamamie idea of quick-building three dwellings; one for Jesus, one for Moses & one for Elijah.

But in God's time, transitions happen; & both Elisha & Peter knew that trying to put off the transition was a fruitless but very human way of begging God for just a little more time to enjoy people, places & things the way we have always known them. A little more time to revel in our comfort with the way things have always been.

We hold them dear, we make them sacred; but we learn, as God's people always have, that we have to do our part. We must carry our mantle for our time, because one day, our successors will look to us, ready to pick up the mantle that we hand on to them. And don't we want it to be a double share of the spirit that we hand on to them when it was our turn to be faithful disciples?

Of course we do. Because as Lacy told me, "We must not fail." Amen.