

“Ch-ch-ch-changes: Elisha’s New Clothes”

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I Kings 19:11-13, 2:1-18

“He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?””

“Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 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. 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.” 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. 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.” 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. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 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. 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.” 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.” 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. 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. He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.” They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. They said to him, “See now, we have fifty strong men among your servants; please let them go and seek your master; it may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley.” He responded, “No, do not send them.” But when they urged him until he was

ashamed, he said, "Send them." So they sent fifty men who searched for three days but did not find him. When they came back to him (he had remained at Jericho), he said to them, "Did I not say to you, Do not go?""

Easton's Bible Dictionary. "Mantle." Noun, singular. Hebrew 'addereth,' a large over-garment. Elijah's mantle was probably a sheepskin.

The mantle Elisha picked up from where it had fallen was the one with which his mentor Elijah covered his face in the great silence on the mountain that more than wind, earthquake, or fire, represented the presence of Yahweh God.

It was the mantle Elijah had thrown over Elisha as a sign of his selection as Elijah's successor according to the word of the Lord.

And it was the mantle Elisha had seen Elijah use to part the waters of the Jordan River.

We use the expression "take up the mantle" today to describe carrying on in someone's name with the humble goal of honoring their accomplishment by surpassing it.

An example: in 2015 US Representative John Culberson of Texas spoke in support of a bipartisan bill instructing the US Treasury to strike a coin series in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. Culberson said, "We need to inspire the next generation of scientists, engineers, and explorers to push the limits and *take up the mantle* of space exploration to Mars and beyond. So it is fitting that proceeds from the coin will fund STEM education scholarships and programs."

The bill did pass, and the coins are for sale. (I now know what I'm getting my numismatic father-in-law for his birthday.) In addition to 25% of the proceeds funding those scholarships, another 25% benefits the Astronauts Memorial Foundation, with the remaining 50% going to the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum's "Destination Moon" exhibit.

By the way, that one-quarter, one-quarter, one-half distribution can help us understand what Elisha meant when he asked to receive "a double portion" of Elijah's spirit. Notwithstanding how we have come to use the expression "take up the mantle," Elisha in our text wasn't saying he hoped to become twice the prophet his mentor was, but instead to receive the extra share to which an eldest son traditionally was entitled when a father's estate was divided. If the inheritance was \$1 in US Commemorative coins, the firstborn son would get a Kennedy half-dollar and his two younger siblings Florida and Texas quarters.

But back to mantles. The "Destination Moon" exhibit is in Seattle now, but will join Neil Armstrong's "rebooted", restored and preserved space suit in the museum in DC in a couple years. And among the millions who will visit that suit may very well be a child whose foot will be the first to stir the red dust on the surface of Mars.

I watched an old interview with Neil Armstrong this week and have the sense that in his modesty he would probably view that 50-year old uniform in practical terms: he was in the right place at

the right moment, so that was why he and not some other was the first, and that was just what he wore. But to that 5th grader on a school trip to Washington, seeing that suit and knowing where it has traveled and whom it has shielded may be a mantle moment, a time of beginning but not knowing what is to come, of perfect clarity and complete uncertainty all at once.

Likewise, for Elijah it may just have been a warm cover-all, something he didn't need once he had "slipped the surly bonds of earth." But for Elisha it was his memory of his mentor, his hopes for his people, his own future faith identity all rolled into one probably-not-great-smelling bundle.

We can read ahead and follow Elisha's career, but Elisha himself taking up that mantle and striking the water asked a genuine question, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?"

Last week it was Jacob, and today Elijah and Elisha. I return to these ancient stories of God's people because they present us with insights into the nature of leadership of faith communities, and are therefore of particular interest to congregations during the time of Pastoral Search.

The transition between the famous and beloved prophet Elijah and his protege Elisha that we've heard today, for instance, suggests the perennial tension between old and new. Will the apprentice ever measure up? Will the loss of a leader or an era keep the community from moving forward? What measure should people seeking to listen to and speak for God use to assess others and themselves?

The Bethel and Jericho communities of prophets are like Search Committee members following on the trail of a candidate, questioning and observing, and finally affirming this one they find, but not without some debate and looking backwards before they look ahead.

But long after the congregations' search for someone to wear the robe is over, the challenge of the Elijah-Elisha story to us as individuals will remain: What will we receive and pass on? Where is our God, and how will we be remembered when we sing...

Swing Low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.
Swing Low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.

Amen.