

As we read and hear these scriptures, may their teachings and sacred stories become for us a Word of Life, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray:

O God, you are Love, and your body is all creation. You are a Tree of Life, and you gather your children in Love. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Our first reading today is from the second book of Kings, in the second chapter. We come onto the scene during a series of emotional exchanges between the prophet Elijah, and his apprentice and helper, Elisha. Listen closely for the passing of the mantle, and the chariots of fire.

\*\*\*\* 2Kings 2: 1-14 \*\*\*

I love this reading. The tales of Elijah and Elisha are filled with excellent adventures, supernatural interventions, bold acts of resistance to stubborn kings, and the deep relationship which grows between a disciple and a mentor. Though the previous chapters are scanty on detail, we can imagine that during the eight or nine years of his apprenticeship, Elisha has learned much from the teaching and example of his older mentor.

When we get to this particular episode, we see the real loyalty and affection which Elisha feels for Elijah. In a scene reminiscent of the Book of Ruth, Elijah tries to coax his apprentice to stay behind ... stay in Gilgal he says, stay in

Bethel, stay in Jericho, stay put, settle down, find some safety and security and peace of mind. Elijah knows that the task of the prophet is hard, and he wants to give Elisha every opportunity to get out of the job. But Elisha is having none of it. At each occasion, he pushes back: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” And even when the other prophets confront Elisha with his master’s departure, he simply tells them to back off and shut up. Elisha is going to stick with his spiritual father right till the end.

There’s something really heartwarming about this story. Even though we’re not told the age of these two people, I have an image of a multi-generational partnership here. This is a story of the leaving of the legacy, the transfer of leadership from one generation to the next. This is the original tale of the passing of the mantle.

As someone who works in the field of theological education and training for ministry, I find this story deeply meaningful. In some ways, our families and communities of faith need to find themselves in this story. I’ll wager that right here, right now, there are Elijahs and Elishas present in our midst. There are elders who are ready to pass on the mantle of spiritual leadership, and there are disciples ready to pick up that mantle, and they are both present in your families, your congregation, your community. So who are they? Who are your Elijahs and Elishas?

Let's start with Elijah. Chances are, your pews are filled with elders like Elijah. People of faith who have served God in the church and the world, who have lived prophetic lives, even if they would never in a million years call themselves prophets. Women and men who have read scripture, organized fall suppers, taken part in bible studies and prayer groups, written letters of protest, trimmed the hedges, shovelled the walk, visited the sick, and loved Jesus. You know these folks. Maybe you ARE one of these folks. These are Elijah.

Elijah has a whole lifetime of wisdom and experience to share. He has carried the mantle and burden of leadership for a long time, and he's ready to pass it on. But what happens then? What comes next for Elijah?

Well, read the scripture ... Elijah doesn't retire. He doesn't just fade away. He doesn't even die ... no, he lets go of the mantle and gets taken up by chariots of fire! So what the heck is that all about??? Well, the bible doesn't tell us what happens after that, but Jewish traditions found in the Talmud and the Kaballah and other mystical writings report something even wilder than the chariots of fire. These mystic rabbis claim that once he's in the heavenly realm, Elijah is transformed into an angel! His name becomes Sandalphon, and his new job is to take the prayers of the faithful of Israel and offer them like incense before the throne of God. Wild, eh?

Well, whatever we may think of these mystical speculations, there is an important message for the Elijahs in our midst.

Passing on the mantle of leadership doesn't mean that your job is done. The Holy Spirit still has precious work for those who pass the mantle. The work, I believe, is threefold. First of all, its looking hard to find the Elisha in your midst ... who are you going to pass the mantle on to? That person might not be obvious to you, but each community of faith has potential Elishas, waiting to have their shoulders tapped and their gifts affirmed. Keep your eyes open, in the church, in your family, in the community: where is Elisha? Second, Elijah needs to exercise a ministry of encouragement and blessing. Don't be one of those people moaning about the good old days, and how the church is dying ... that is not what Elisha needs to hear! Speak instead about resilience, and fortitude, and hope. Remind your disciples that God is faithful, and that there is amazing work for them to do, even – especially – in these times of crisis. And thirdly, having passed on the mantle, get ready for the next phase of ministry: prayer. Like Elijah transformed into Sandalphon, the primary spiritual work of our elders is ongoing, unceasing, unrelenting intercession. In our churches we need seasoned prayer warriors, veteran prayer-weavers, who can wrap the next generations in a sheltering mantle of blessing. Prayer is a deep mystery. We don't know exactly how it works. But its real. Prayer totally makes a difference. After the mantle of leadership is passed, each Elijah here is called to enter the Order of Sandalphon, and lift up to God the hopes, dreams, struggles, and yearnings of Elisha. Those who take up

the mantle these days certainly need a double-portion of the Spirit. These are not easy times that we face...

So what about the Elishas among us? Who are you, and what might God be saying to you? And to be clear here, being an Elisha does not necessarily mean being a strapping young lad or lass. Age is not a barrier to taking up the mantle of ministry. Nor is ability, nor gender, nor race, class, sexual orientation, nor any of the other barriers which the world tries to put in your way. No, when the Spirit calls, Elisha must answer that call. Perhaps someone here has been hearing that call for a long time ... well, you can run, but you can't hide. The Hound of Heaven will track you down come hell or high water. If you are Elisha, it is time for you to step forward in faith, and ask for a double-portion of the Spirit, to minister in these troubled times.

So where is Elisha? Perhaps Elisha is not in your pews this morning. Perhaps she is out working, or at home taking care of the kids, or a sick parent. Perhaps Elisha left the church years ago, but still has that ember of the gospel glowing in his heart. Sometimes we have to go out and look for our Elishas, and tap them on the shoulder, whisper words of hope and encouragement, remind them that they are needed. We need them. The church needs them. A hurting world needs them. God needs them. O Elisha, God needs you.

There's another story in the bible which reminds me a lot of Elijah and Elisha. It's the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene,

outside the tomb on Easter morning. Have a listen, and see what you think...

\*\*\* John 20: 11-18 \*\*\*

In this passage, Jesus has not yet ascended into heaven like Elijah does ... but he's getting ready for that. He knows that the time of his departure is near, and he tenderly passes on the mantle of ministry to Mary. Mary becomes the first apostle, sent to share the good news with the rest of Jesus' friends, and beyond them to the world. Like Elisha before her, Mary is invited to take on the mantle of the Spirit, and follow Her calling out into a hurting, broken, beloved world. We need to find our Marys. We need to find our Elishas.

At St. Andrew's College, we are blessed and honoured to have the privilege of working with the Marys and Elishas of our world. As the College recruiter, I seek out these folks, I track them high and low. So if you know of an Elisha or a Mary in your congregation, or family, or community ... or if you think you may be one ... then let me know. Well, first let God know ... but right after that, give me a call! God's world needs prophets and healers ... Christ's church needs ministers and leaders ... Elisha and Mary, step forward and pick up that mantle. It's the Spirit who is calling.

Let us pray: Holy, Beloved God, we thank you for the Spirit in our midst. We thank you for the Elijahs of our world, and for the Marys and Elishas. Help us to pass on our mantles when it is time, and to take up those mantles as the Spirit leads. From

generation to generation, may God be glorified and Christ's name be praised, this day and always, world without end.  
Amen.