**June 30, 2019**

**2 Kings 2:1-15**

Elijah is universally recognized as one of Israel’s great prophets. Along with Moses, Elijah is considered one of the most significant leaders in Old Testament history. Elijah knew God in a way that no one else did. He saw God, and spoke to God, and spoke *for* God as no one else did. Last week we read the story of Elijah waiting for God on the side of the mountain. Elijah met Elisha on his journey down from the mountain. Elisha was working in a field by the road, when Elijah literally “threw his mantle over him.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Elijah took his traveling cloak and threw it on a stranger. This signaled that Elisha would become Elijah’s servant and disciple. These two men then walked together and worked together, sharing life and ministry, just as Jesus would later do with the disciples.

We don’t know much about their shared time together. After Elisha’s initial call story, this is the next time his name is mentioned. Even though *we* don’t know any of the details, Elisha obviously proved himself worthy of succeeding Elijah. For here when Elijah was taken up into the clouds, Elisha was witness to the whole scene. He saw the chariots of fire. He saw the horses. He saw the whirlwind carry Elijah away. Then he picked up Elijah’s mantle and continued on the journey without his mentor.

There wasn’t much background shared about Elisha, but what we know in a few verses connected him to the greatest ones who have come and will come. Just as Moses was called from a enslavement to great leadership, just as David will be called from a humble shepherding career to royalty, so Elisha was called from working in the field to following God. He didn’t have a great education or prior experience. He was just a common working man with whom God would do amazing things. Just as Moses parted the Red Sea, and Elijah parted the Jordan River, Elisha, too, was also able to part flowing Jordan River. This wasn’t a common miracle – quite the opposite. It was another clue that Elisha was worth paying attention to. He was powerful, apparently inheriting a double share of Elijah’s spirit, since he witnessed Elijah’s ascension into heaven. Elijah, who is still considered the greatest of prophets – Elijah, who is still the only person to ascend into heaven (Jesus was next) – we know that because he *saw* Elijah’s ascension, Elisha was given “double [his mentor’s] spirit.” What power has come to him! What blessings will come from him!

As Elijah ascended into heaven, his mantle (outer cloak or shawl) fell behind and Elijah picked it up. Was the power in the garment? I think not, but we have come to value the mantles that are literally and metaphorically passed from one person to the next, from one generation to the next. Mantles being those things which we literally and metaphorically carry around our shoulders – a title, role, or responsibility; a connection; a gift. A mantle could be as simple as your last name, or as complicated as the role of first-born in a large royal family. The mantle of faith connects believers to all those who have come before, and is something that we carry forward to those coming after us. The mantle of faith is visible in garments like clerical stoles, in droplets of baptismal water, in crumbs of Communion bread. But largely, the mantle of faith is an invisible gift carried through song and dance and scripture and community.

If you’ve been in my office, you may have noticed a small jar of ashes sitting on the corner of my desk. They are a remnant from my ministry to the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN. These ashes are from a rotting old hymnal which I found in an overlooked corner of the basement. The hymnal was on the bottom of a pile of other forgotten things: rusty tools, old Sunday School chairs, and hymnals that were once a mainstay in the church sanctuary. Held by worshippers on their best and brightest days, as well as in the depths of despair, this hymnal’s beloved words and music were carelessly strewn around the floor by a church mouse building a nest. Amongst the fragments were memorable phrases like “I Love to Tell the Story” and “Silent Night.” Such a tragic end for what had been a holy friend and companion.

I could not let it stay there. When I left the church, I scooped up a handful of the rotting pages to remind me that: 1) Hymns are a part of our literal and metaphorical “soil” of faith. Hymns are the dirt into which we root our faith. These are the words we use to describe who God is – a “friend in Jesus” or “Immortal, invisible, God only wise.” These are the notes that delineate Christmas worship from Easter worship, funerals from weddings, the ordinary from the glory.

2) And inasmuch, hymns are the mantle our predecessors draped around our shoulders to comfort us in the midst of grief, lift up our praise, and carry our supplications before the throne of God. Hymns carry our faith beyond a simple or selfish place to a global perspective that transcends time and space; hymns connect us to other believers singing in each worship service in our own sanctuary (tying our prayers and faith to that of our pew neighbors), and hymns are threads weaving us into the tapestry of believers who have sung these same songs for generations. When we sing “Silent Night” we are not just proclaiming Jesus’ birth or remembering quiet, holy moments in our own lifetime; we are also singing the memories of Christmas Eve services from the last 201 years. Similarly, “Amazing Grace” and “Jesus Loves Me” are not ours alone to treasure; they have encouraged millions of new believers, nurturing many, many first steps down the road of Christian discipleship. When we sing their beloved words and melodies, we wrap the past, present, and future Church around our shoulders, getting a taste of the Kingdom of God.

Prayer, too, is a mantle that connects us to those who’ve come before and after us. In praying old words like the *shemah*, and the Lord’s Prayer, and the Prayer of St. Francis, and other historical contributions to our *Book of Common Worship*, we are wrapping the prayers of The Church around our own faith. We strengthen our own faith and prayers when we add our voice to the mass choir praying time-tested words. And we learn how to pray as we use those time-tested words.

When we pray with Huck before bed each night, we ask him, “what would you like to pray for?” He often says things like fire trucks and police cars and fire and smoke. So we pray thank you for those who take care of us in fires, and when we need help, and we pray for those who need help tonight. But that is *gradually* starting to expand. He is learning how to pray for people. Not because we’ve ever told him what to (or what not to) pray for, but because he is listening and watching you and us. Huck heard me telling Adam about Carol Keil being in the hospital several weeks ago. Then when it came time for our evening prayers, I asked him, “Who would you like to pray for tonight?” expecting his normal “fire truck” answer. But he surprised me by saying, “mmmm… for Miss Carol in the hospital.” You have shown him (Carol has shown him) that she is loved. And we have shown him that we pray for those we love, particularly those who are sick and need help. Prayer is the mantle that connects you to Huck as you have prayed for him and taught him how to pray. Now he is beginning to carry that mantle forward as he prays for others.

It’s not enough just to love others or pray for others, though. The mantle of faith cannot be carried forward by internal action alone. The mantle faith requires some outward action and evangelism to move from one generation to the next. When we receive Communion, one of our prayers asks that “as [the bread] is Christ’s body for *us*, send us **out** into the world to be the body of Christ for others”. The meal is not to be enjoyed alone without further reflection or action. The meal is not just for us. The meal is for people who haven’t yet been invited. The meal is for those who have not yet tasted. Jesus invites a broken world to come here and be healed. And we are part of the healing process. We are called to go out and do, go out and love, go out and serve. And if we don’t…

Considering Christ’s final command in the gospel of Matthew – to go out into the world making disciples and baptizing – Considering the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost – which gave each disciple the gift of speaking an unknown language to an unknown people – one could easily argue that we are not faithful Christian if we *don’t* go out and do. We are not doing our job if we just “keep it to ourselves.” A great example is the Shaker religious community. There are only 2 Shakers left in what was once a vibrant faith.[[2]](#footnote-2) They have given the world vibrant hymns and prayers, but their mantle of faith will not be carried to another generation within their own church. It wasn’t enough just to pray for peace. It wasn’t enough just to practice tolerance. They needed to put evangelical and servant feet on their message.

Sweet Hollow has inherited a mantle of faith from wonderful saints. From founders like the Ketchum family to more recent members like the Rogers and Wansor families, we have inherited power and honor and blessings. For almost 200 years, hymns and prayers have been sung and said in this very Sanctuary. For almost 200 years we have been well prayed for. Now we must be looking forward to see who will take up our mantle. Who are we calling from the field to come and join us? With whom are we sharing our own gifts? In whom are we vesting our history and future?

In closing, let me invite you to think of two different people today. First, think of one person who has passed along their mantle of faith to you. A specific name and face, with specific times and ways that they shared their Christian journey with you. Secondly, think of another person who is not yet here in church, but whose life parallels your own. What person can you call from their ordinary life to join you in faith? What person could you invite to worship? What person could you begin to pray for and love and serve? Then let us make room under our mantle for them to be covered, embraced, and called to go and do likewise.

1. 1 Kings 19:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/03/508100617/one-of-the-last-shakers-dies> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)