

Picking up the Mantle
Reverend C. Dennis Shaw

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

New Revised Standard Version

2:1 – 2:2: 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.

2:6 – 2:14: Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he [Elisha I assume] 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. ¹

(Lectionary Text for Week 8 of the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C)

We stand here this morning anticipating a day we set aside every year to watch baseball, eat hotdogs, set off fireworks, and otherwise celebrate the birthday of our country.

One of our own will reach 90 this Wednesday – Marge Edmonds. [As an aside: a little under 40% of the time we have had a country called the United States of America – Marge has lived in it. Congratulations Marge.]

I imagine we celebrate for various reasons – some with a connection to the history of the day and other times -- it is just a good excuse to stop and eat hot dogs and maybe even, if we are old enough and know how to do it in moderation, drink a beer.

But occasionally the suggested reading for the Sunday before a National Holiday provides words that talk to both. Today is just such a day.

Our big idea for today is: continuity and there is continuity between the generations to God's ministry in the world.

This passage is about continuity – and I think as we stand on another July 4th, having us reflect for a moment on continuity might be of value.

Continuity is defined as “the state of being continuous”. Now before you laugh, that is actually quite good, but continuous with what? And the second definition helps us with that: an uninterrupted succession or flow, and maybe it is even about the “whole” it makes sense – that is it is coherent -- with itself.²

This Wednesday – one of the things we stop and reflect on is our own continuity with the past and how we accept that mantle and move on ourselves separating the same waters that our ancestors separated.

You don't do that?

Why?

Let me ask that maybe after today, you might see a reason for that reflection on continuity in order to retain faithful connection with the past and provide a vision for the future – in short – maybe we ask for an extra portion of our inheritance and ask that we be worthy to pick up the mantle of those who have gone on before.

Elijah is a powerful figure in the Bible. His name means something like: My God is Yahweh. And Elijah carries the job description of prophet – one who speaks to the world on behalf of God. And in this role as God's prophet -- among many things – Elijah confronted Ahab – the King - and his wife, Jezebel, and called them out for the murder and improper taking of property that wasn't theirs.

Like many prophets in the bible, Elijah spoke the truth – God's truth – to power.

The scene we witness here is one of the transfer of authority from Elijah to the Elisha – the man who will literally and figuratively pick up the mantle of prophet on behalf of Elijah – and of course, God.

The two elements I want to focus on in this rich text are the meaning of a “double portion” and continuity. They are related.

Elisha is not asking for more than Elijah has himself. He is not saying “I need double your spirit”. Rather, he is saying ‘I need to be the First Born in terms of inheritance’. This world had extensive rules about inheritance rights and the boys – sorry ladies – split

up the estate of the father among themselves, with the First Born son getting a “double share” – four sons, would lead to five shares – with the oldest getting a “double portion”.

The key for us is that Elisha is asking to be Elijah’s first born son in terms of inheriting from him the authority of prophet he has – lawyers sometimes even call this term “the mantle of your authority”. Bishop Brown two weeks ago told the new ministers to take on authority and then, draped a stole on their shoulders.

Part of the inheritance issue is about “continuity”.

The same is true with the idea of the mantle.

Notice that Elijah’s mantle – his cloak – an outer garment he wraps around his other clothing -- has come off in the pandemonium of his ascent into heaven, and Elisha has picked it up and – after mourning for a moment -- asked in effect ‘where is God in all of this’ and discovers that Elijah’s mantle has passed to him in his own ability to perform the water dividing miracle that Elijah had performed.

You could even suggest to yourself in the miracle her performs immediately upon picking up the mantle that there is a more extended continuity here? The author of Kings is pointing us to Moses.

At least part of the theme of continuity is given to us in the New Testament in the Transfiguration Story we hear ever year.

Who meets with Jesus in the transfiguration story read every year right before the start of Lent: Elijah and Moses.

That scene is about many things – but one of the things it is about is – Continuity.

The theme of continuity of Jesus with Elijah is strongly suggested in the Acts 1 passages where Jesus ascension into heaven is described and then, reflected upon by the Disciples. They strongly hint at continuity with how they have seen God perform in the past – and this passage of Elijah’s ascent into heaven, and the fact Elisha picks up Elijah’s mantle is certainly an echo in the Acts Pentecost story. If the “echo” of the 2 Kings story is accurate – part of the Pentecost story is about picking up the Mantle of Jesus – and the disciples see that empowerment – the mantle if you will -- in the gift of the HS.

This Wednesday we are given the opportunity to celebrate an unbroken relationship with an idea – Continuity with an idea – a concept.

Abraham Lincoln ‘s address at Gettysburg Cemetery --about events that happened in early July, 1863 – attempted to connect those listeners that day to the events in Philadelphia, 1776.

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

These words were spoken in order to connect us with the past – “Four score and seven” and what did they do “brought forth a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”.

Lincoln was under no illusion that the proposition was a reality – in fact, he saw what was happening then as a test of that very proposition, that idea. He did see it however as an idea that would provide us a continuity of hope from one generation to the next in order to link us with the proposition -- expanding over time to mean color and gender and national origin – were all part of the original dream.

As citizens, I would pray that these words remind us of who we are this coming Wednesday and who will be in the future – a message of continuity from the past into the future.

They provide a seamless tapestry between those who have been to those of who are and I would pray to those who are to be.

As Christians, I would pray that these words remind us of who we are today and who will be in the future – a message of continuity from the past into the future.

And part of that continuity – calls on some of us to pick up the mantle that is haphazardly – maybe in the midst of pandemonium – dropped at our feet.

You don’t have to be an Elisha – all you have to do is agree to be a disciple.

You don’t have to (and generate some for examples)

Just as Jesus departure dropped a mantle on the first disciples that they needed to pick up – the mantle of being Jesus in the world – we all here now “the living” should ourselves be “dedicated to the great task remaining before us.”

Lincoln always seems to provide us powerful words

He reminds us that there is continuity between those who have labored in the vineyard on behalf of a wonderful goal ... and that we use a day to pause, reflect, and take stock in what they did in order to advance the cause ...

Elisha picked up the mantle – and then went out and performed a miracle.

Are you ready to pick up a mantle and go out and perform a miracle ...

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The Big Idea for Today's Meditation is that God's Ministry will continue. In the Kings passage – the mantle passes from Elijah to Elisha – during Pentecost in Acts, the mantle is transferred from Jesus to his disciples.

But let's be clear – the mantle continues to be passed. Just as on July the Fourth, we remember how there is continuity from one generation to the next – embracing an idea that was given birth in July, 1776, God has an idea that is also passed from generation to generation, and each of us are given the chance to pick up that mantle, and perform miracles in the name of God!

How has that mantle been transferred here at Stratmoor? Do you feel at times a little overwhelmed and just a bit cautious when you reach down to pick up the mantle of Harold Bergren, Kenny and Wilma Carpenter, Bonna Cash Campbell, Berniece Overlees, Gladys Fuhrmeister, and yes, Paul Murphy.³

Well, if today's big idea is that God's ministry will continue, let us assure all here today, that God's ministry that is Stratmoor Hills – is going to continue. And just as Jesus tells his disciples throughout the Gospels – he will be with them – this Jesus will not abandon us – in fact – he will be with us to the end of the age.

When we truly “fix our eyes upon Jesus” and keep him as our goal and model, we will truly pick up that mantle just fine.

We have turned a corner.

We are acquiring energy.

We are moving to being a congregation that is welcoming, increasing in our discipleship, exciting in our worship, and I pray extraordinarily generous in our stewardship.

Oh, no question, picking up the mantle that God drops in front of us can be scary and make us nervous – but ... there is a continuity... there is a cloud of witnesses cheering us on in our goal ... and we one of the ways we pick up that mantle from Jesus is through our connection with him and others at this table.

This written sermon as text was the platform for a sermon delivered more extemporaneously on July 1st, 2007 at Stratmoor Hills UMC, in Colorado Springs.

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¹ The Big Idea for this Sermon is drawn from the *reflections* for the 2 Kings 2 materials in the *New Interpreter's Bible*.

² Answers.com definition.

³ Names from Stratmoor's past, some living, some deceased. Paul Murphy was a former Pastor who died last year.