

**“A Word of Encouragement for the Church and Its Leaders”**

**2 Kings 2:1–12**

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I have some history with the reading from 2 Kings 2. It is a dramatic tale about a transition in leadership which ends with the prophet Elijah being taken up into heaven by a whirlwind with a chariot and horses of fire involved. It is a scene like the one found in Mark 9 wherein Jesus is transfigured, and as Peter starts talking before he knows what is going on, Elisha starts babbling about the chariots of Israel and its horseman.

I have not had any experiences that were quite this dramatic and otherworldly, but on my first Sunday at Knollwood Baptist Church in Winston-Salem in 1998, this was one of the lectionary readings, and it seemed fitting for that day, as it does for this day when we are ordaining deacons. For this is a story about leadership, and while some of the details may seem otherworldly, the message is down-to-earth. To borrow a phrase from homiletics professor Martha Simmons, such stories describe “the place where the sweet by and by meets the nasty here and now.” This story offers a word of encouragement for churches anxious about leadership and for the leaders themselves.

The story begins with two prophets — one at the end of his ministry, the other just beginning, making a journey toward the former’s place of departure. The movement from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan retraces Israel’s entry into the Promised Land in reverse. Each step of the way, Elijah tells Elisha not to bother coming any farther, but each step of the way, Elisha insists. Elijah has become like a father to him, and he is not about to leave him alone, not to mention the fact that he will seek a blessing from him, a double portion of his spirit.

At the end of the story, Elijah is taken up into heaven. The text does not say that he dies, which is why a chair is reserved for him at Passover meals. He could show up anywhere, as he does on the

mountain at the transfiguration of Jesus. But Elisha is left to gaze into heaven until he realizes that Elijah's mantle — a long, loose cloak symbolic of leadership, spirit, and empowerment — has fallen off Elijah. Elisha picks up the mantle and all it represents.

The message for the church is a word of encouragement about the continuity of leadership in God's realm. God always provides the leaders needed in each new generation. This is a concern for many in our time, as it is for the Royal Family in the United Kingdom, with King Charles' cancer diagnosis. One wants an heir with a spare, as they say, and though they have them, William doesn't seem very interested, and Harry has distanced himself. After Elizabeth's record reign of seventy years, any question about the future must seem even more unsettling, even though the role is mostly symbolic now.

Many express a similar concern for the church. It is a challenging time for the church with diminishing numbers and influence in our culture. Leadership, from clergy and laity, is critical now. Yet it seems like most churches have lost many key figures such that we wonder quite anxiously who will replace them! But God always provides. Who could replace Moses? Joshua did. Who could follow Elijah? Elisha did. No one could do all that Jesus did, but he called disciples anyway and taught them/us how to continue his work of justice and love.

God will provide today — seven new deacons being ordained, adults of different ages accepting our blessing and the Spirit's empowerment; young people learning about the faith who are already serving the church in many ways... with the sound system, in the kitchen, on mission trips; children who ask questions and make observations that let us know the future of the church will be just fine.

It must have seemed like all was lost with Elijah's departure from this world, but the mantle of leadership would be passed on, the same Spirit who guided him would guide another, God's work would not be left without human leaders. Nor will it now.

But while there is a word of encouragement for the church in this story, there is also a word of encouragement for its leaders in any given

time and place. I cannot speak for our new deacons, but I can speak for myself as a minister who has served churches with revered icons who came before me, including this one. It is easy to be intimidated by our predecessors, to wonder how we can measure up to the people who have come before us. And such humility is better than the kind of arrogance that assumes that we are God's gift to world and any church is lucky to have us! But we should never sell short God's calling in our lives.

Elisha asks Elijah for a double portion of his spirit, or a double mouthful, as some have said. This fulfills what Deuteronomy 21:17 says the eldest son should receive, and as we have noted, Elisha views Elijah as a father figure, an intimate guide, a mentor and more. But perhaps there is more going on here, perhaps Elisha considers it possible that he might accomplish more than his mentor. The rabbis count Elijah doing eight miracles in scripture while they count Elisha doing sixteen — double (Jason Byassee, *workingpreacher.org*)! Who knows?

And who knows what any of us may accomplish, in the power of God's Spirit? We should not be arrogant but nor should we sell ourselves or God short. And nor should we compare ourselves to anyone else before, during, or after our time of service. This goes for all leaders, indeed, all Christians. We are all given a unique array of gifts to be used for the benefit of others and to the glory of God.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel told a story about a time when the great Rebbe Zushya was on his deathbed. He lamented to his friends how little he had accomplished in his life. So, someone asked him, "Rebbe, are you afraid of the judgment soon to come?" He almost said, "Yes," but paused before doing so, and then replied, "No. For when I appear before the Almighty — may the Divine Name be forever blessed — I will not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' I will only be asked, 'Why were you not Zushya?'" (*Story Theology*, Terence Tilley, p. xiv)

That is all we will be asked. Have we been the person God created us to be, used the gifts God has given us to use? This applies to ministers and deacons and everyone who seeks to follow Jesus. Maybe we're not comfortable speaking in public, but we can listen to others attentively. Maybe we aren't good with numbers, but we are good with

people. Maybe we're not a planner, but we are creative and visionary. The church needs all these gifts. We are each called to use ours.

This story offers an encouraging word for the church and its leaders, and then it holds up the value of mentoring and relationships in general. Our primary guidance comes from Jesus. This is the point of Transfiguration. Amidst all the show of light and clouds, the message is, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" We listen in different ways, through prayer and openness, but we begin by paying attention to Jesus' teachings about love and forgiveness, service and sacrifice.

But while Christ is our primary teacher, it helps to have mentors, people we learn from, people who learn from us, people with whom we are in a mutually beneficial, caring relationship. Elijah and Elisha model all of this for us. Mentor and mentee learn from the other and benefit from realizing they are not alone. Faith is lived out in community.

I have been fortunate to have many incredible mentors — my youth minister, Rick Tyler; my seminary professor and doctoral advisor, Glenn Hinson; the first pastor I worked with, Ron Higdon; church members like Dewey Hobbs and Elmo Scoggin; friends like Charles Kimball, Molly Marshall, Bill Leonard, and Randall Lolley. Each of these guides has shaped my personhood and ministry, and I hope I have offered them something as well. I know how much I have learned from the seminary students I have mentored over the years. And I have learned a great deal from my colleagues here and in other settings.

Leadership requires individual responsibility, but it does not have to be exercised in isolation. Everyone benefits when we work collaboratively. This applies to ministers, deacons, and everyone else. Wherever we serve, we do so better with others.

And the truth is — no matter how lonely we feel, we are never alone in our work. God is always with us, as are our sisters and brothers in Christ. This too is encouraging for all of us. May we never forget it!