

“Passing the Torch”

2 Kings 2:1-12

The word that we use to describe what happened to Jesus on the mountain that day with Peter, James, and John, when his clothes suddenly became dazzling white and Moses and Elijah appeared with him, the word we use for that, the word that the Gospel writers use, is *transfiguration*. Jesus, they say, was *transfigured*. But if Jesus was transfigured, what would we say happened to Elijah in that story from our first reading for today when he went up to heaven in a whirlwind, with chariots and horses of fire? That word, it turns out, is *translated*. Elijah was *translated*, like an ancient Greek text is translated into a modern language, or an English novel is translated into German. If that is what you were going to say, give yourself an extra ten points. My dictionary, which is now quite old and has ceased to reflect the spoken language of today in all of its variety, offers as the second meaning of the word translate: “to convey to heaven or to a non-temporal condition without death.” Which sounds pretty much like what happened to Elijah. He was conveyed to heaven, apparently, without having to die to get there. It doesn’t sound like a bad way to go. If we could all just be translated from here to wherever it is that we are going next – that would be all right. But the chances of that happening to any of us are pretty slim since the Bible only tells about two people that it ever happened to, Elijah and Enoch. So I wouldn’t count on it.

Elijah, the great ninth-century prophet of Israel, veteran of draught and famine, rain storm and fire storm, nemesis of monarchs, challenger of Baal worshipers, fed once by ravens and once by an angel, the old prophet was about done. His time had come to hang up his prophet’s mantle. He had had his day in the sun, he had fought the good fight, run the race, finished the course. His scrapbook was full. It was time to step aside. Younger minds and younger bodies were ready to step forward, to take on the Ahabs and Jezebels of the world, to defend the faith.

Apparently there were several possibilities for a successor. There was something like a school of prophets, young men who were eager to take on the role. But Elijah had his eye on one young man in particular, whose name, not to make this too confusing, was Elisha. (The way you can remember that is alphabetically – Elijah comes before Elisha.) Only the old prophet wasn’t really convinced that this young kid was up to the task. Would he be able to stand up to that most wicked of all queens, Jezebel? Would he be able to look King Herod in the eye, as Elijah had done, and to say, “It is not I who troubles Israel, but you.”? He wasn’t too sure. Like many of us who have to turn over the reigns to others when the time comes, he was not really sure that anyone could do it right, that is, the way he had been doing it.

Keep in mind, this is the Elijah who at one point complained to God that he alone was left in Israel, still faithful. But God reminded him that there were still 7,000 others who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Elijah may have been a bit self-absorbed. But prophets are human too, I guess.

So we get the story here of Elijah’s departure, or translation, and how his mantle fell upon Elisha, who becomes his successor. But first, Elisha has to pass a test. Unlike the story of the transfiguration where Jesus invites Peter, James and John to join him on the mountain, Elisha, the young prophet, is not invited to come along. In fact, he is disinvented. At each juncture on this dizzying journey that Elijah takes, he tells the younger prophet: “Elisha, stay here. For the Lord has sent me to Bethel, to Jericho, to the Jordan.” And each time, Elisha answers this way: “As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”

Many of you know that at our house right now we have two golden retrievers, our own, Bella, and our daughter’s, Sandy. We are keeping Sandy for about six months while our daughter and her family

are out of the country.

Often I try to tell these dogs just what Elijah told Elisha. I say to them: "You stay here while I go upstairs to get something. I'll be right back." And they look at me and what I see in their eyes is what Elisha said to Elijah: "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." And they don't. They follow me upstairs and then back downstairs again. They "dog" my steps, one could say.

Elisha would not be dissuaded. He is a man on a mission. Elijah asks him: "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." One last request. Elisha says: "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." In other words, whatever it is that you've got, I want it! Maybe he meant he wanted twice as much as what Elijah had, or maybe he meant that he wanted the first born share, or two thirds. In either case, the point is the same. Elisha wanted some of what he saw in Elijah.

Elijah says to Elisha: "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." Elisha keeps his eyes focused upon Elijah as the chariots of fire take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, the mantle falls and Elisha takes it up. It is a great story.

The part that intrigues me is how much Elisha wants to be like Elijah. The kids used to say: "I want to be like Mike," in reference to Michael Jordan. Maybe now they want to be like Tiger. Sports figures, movie stars, popular singers are all being watched. In Italy, during the golden age of opera, in the middle and late 19th century, young men aspired to be great opera singers.

But it isn't always famous people. What about us? Are there any people out there who might be watching you, watching me, to see if there is something about us that they might want to emulate, who would say to themselves, yes, I want some of that, what he's got, what she's got? The truth is there is a lot of watching going on. We watch others, and others watch us.

I remember seeing an interview with the great comedian and film-maker Mel Brooks once. He was saying how he liked to watch people and that that was how he got a lot of his material. But since he had become quite famous, he noticed that people were watching him. Then he turned to the camera and said: "Stop watching me. I can't watch you if you're watching me!"

A University of Colorado psychiatry professor named Stephen Greenspan (not to be confused with Alan) has written a new book entitled, *The Annals of Gullibility* in which he tries to explain why people get taken. Ironically, after he wrote the book he lost more than half of his retirement investments in the Bernie Madoff Ponzi scheme. In any case, this is what he says: "The basic mechanism explaining the success of Ponzi schemes is the tendency of humans to model their actions, especially when dealing with matters they don't fully understand, on the behavior of other humans." (*The Art of the Con*, Michael Shermer, *Scientific American*, March '09)

In our first church, in a little town in Indiana that, very much like the mythical Lake Wobegon, the town that time forgot, there were three Protestant churches plus a Catholic church. The three pastors of the Protestant churches were all young and, as was common at that time, all male, none of us long out of seminary, and we all became friends. The three couples did things together. It was very nice.

Only there was one problem. It was me. I wasn't sure that the minister of the Methodist Church was a real Christian. I wasn't sure about his theology. He didn't say the right words. I had never met anyone like him before. He seemed to question all of the things I had always been taught and had accepted as Gospel. So I kept my eye on Dale. I watched him when he took the leadership of the CROP campaign in the county, and I watched when someone he didn't know needed a dialysis machine, how he organized a fund raiser in the community. And I watched how he dealt with me and my suspicious attitude toward him.

Eventually, his unorthodoxy led to him being moved to another church in another town. Some time after he left, I wrote him a letter and told him that although I had met a lot of people in town whose beliefs were much more like my own than his were, I hadn't met anyone in that town who displayed the spirit of Christ better than I thought he had.

People are watching. And the question is this: what is there in my life worth emulating? What, if anything, are we adults modeling for the children and young people we know? What is attractive in our lives, what is powerful enough that a young person would want to emulate it?

Those of us who are parents know that our children watch us. They watch to see how we behave under pressure, what things are important to us, what really matters to us. And the children and the young people of the church are watching. They want to see if all this church business is real or not. Are these adults just doing what is expected of them? Are they just doing the socially proper thing by going to church, going through the motions, or does this stuff really matter to them? Does it affect their behavior at work or at home?

Now I certainly don't mean to imply that we need to be perfect in order for someone to emulate us. Actually, it may be just the opposite. How do we handle failure? What happens when the chips are down?

And it is not only as individuals that we have an opportunity to provide mentoring and example. There is such a thing as a mentoring community, a mentoring environment. I like to think that that is what we have here, whether we necessarily try to have it or not. The early Christian community impressed those who were watching by the way they cared for each other, who said to each other: "see how they love one another."

People are watching – our own young people, visitors, the community. How do we make decisions? Are we rational and thoughtful, considerate of everyone's opinion? Do we allow for and acknowledge dissent? How do we handle conflict? Is there bitterness and backstabbing, or do we strive, as the Apostle Paul encourages, for unity in the spirit and a tenderness toward one another? How do we deal with issues that are troublesome? Do we sweep them under the rug? Are we afraid to talk about them? Or do we try to address them, knowing going in that there will be differences of opinion. All of these factors and many more are what people notice.

Young children are watching older children. Young people are watching older youth and adults. Young parents are watching older parents. Those with young people in high school are watching what happens in the families with young people in college. Middle aged folks are watching older folks to see how they handle getting older. Pre-retireds are watching the retireds. And the retireds are watching those who may be thinking that the chariots can't be that far off. We were watching Barb Clements and Dana Bradley and others. In one sense, you never stop being a mentor.

Is this a call to perfection? Absolutely not. It is a call for genuineness and an awareness that we do have a role to play in the lives of others. And if we are who we claim to be, someone may even want what we've got.