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**God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha**  
**VII. From Generation to Generation**  
**II Kings 2:1-15**

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We might well have skipped over this story. Because, on the surface, it is simply the story of Elijah passing on his office as prophet to Elisha. Aside from Elijah's ascension into heaven, not a lot happens here. Plus, we already knew this was going to take place. Back in I Kings 19, when Elijah was despairing under the broom tree, God had told him that he was to go find Elisha, the son of Shaphat, and to anoint him as his aide and eventually successor.<sup>1</sup> And, again, that's all that basically happens in this story – Elisha takes over from Elijah. So, why read this story?

Because of the details in the story – the very curious, even strange, details. Why, for example, do Elijah and Elisha have to trek all over the Promised Land – from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River and beyond – especially since nothing very important seems to happen at each of these stops? And why, also, is such a fuss being made of the prophet's mantle being used to part the Jordan River? Okay, the parting of the river is pretty cool – but still, what is that all about? And why, then, does Elijah keep trying to drop Elisha along the way, when we already know – he already knows! – that Elisha is to be his successor?

It is all these curious details that move this story from being a rather ordinary prophetic succession story to a truly interesting teaching and meditation on what it means to be a Christian. What I think Elijah, and God through Elijah, is doing in all of these curious details is teaching Elisha what it means to take up the prophetic mantle, teaching him what has been before in order to prepare him for what is to come. And, in so doing, he is imparting the same lessons to us. That before our faith can have a future, we must first come to understand that it has a past. And that this past is critical to our understanding of who we are in the present, as well as to what we are to do as God's people in the future.

Here's another way to say this same thing – maybe even make it a bit clearer. This comes from Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas's important little book, Resident Aliens:

*When we are baptized, we . . . jump on a moving train . . . We become part of a journey that began long before we got here and shall continue long after we are gone . . . [S]alvation is not so much a new beginning but rather a beginning in the middle, so speak. Faith begins, not in discovery, but in remembrance. The story began without us, as a story of the peculiar way God is redeeming the world . . .<sup>2</sup>*

*“The story began without us”* – meaning faith begins in remembering. That, I think, is our theme, as Elijah is followed by Elisha; and as we, having received the faith from those who have gone before us, in turn pass it on to those who will follow us. From generation to generation.

Let’s look at the story, look at those curious details. To begin, this business of Elijah leading Elisha from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River and beyond. What is this all about? I would suggest that it is to teach Elisha and to teach us that our faith has a holy geography that we need to know and to honor, and in which to make our spiritual home. For each one of those places Elijah and Elisha go to are deeply rooted in Israel’s entrance into the Promised Land during the time of Moses and then his successor Joshua. When Israel first sets foot in the Promised Land, they camp at Gilgal. And there at Gilgal, all the Israelite men are circumcised, and Israel as a whole celebrates its first Passover in the Promised Land.<sup>3</sup> Bethel, the second stop on the tour, is associated with the city of Ai, and was destroyed along with Ai in one of the opening battles in the conquest of the Promised Land – a battle demonstrating to Israel that God would conquer the occupying peoples before them, if only they would trust in Him.<sup>4</sup> Jericho, of course, is the site of that great victory God won for Israel with nothing but a bit of marching, trumpet playing, and a great communal shout.<sup>5</sup> And as for the crossing of the Jordan River and going beyond – well that is precisely how the Conquest had begun.<sup>6</sup>

The Christian faith has a holy geography – places where God has been especially present and active in the past. To know those places is to know something of the power and glory of the God we serve. To know those places is to be drawn deeper into that story of salvation which began long before us. To know these holy places, the geography of our faith, is to be drawn more deeply into the Communion of the Saints, and more deeply into relationship with the Living God.

So, what are those holy places which mark out the geography of our faith this morning? There are those places, of course, which we share in common with all Christians: from Eden to east of Eden to Babel, from Egypt to the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai, from Bethlehem to Bethany and to Jerusalem, from Golgotha to the empty tomb to the mount of the Ascension. These places, and our knowledge and memory of them, bind us closer to that story of God’s great plan of salvation, even as they bind us closer to the God who has authored that story.

But, of course, our faith also has a geography of holy places which are more specific to our own participation in the faith handed down from generation to generation. This sanctuary, where we have worshipped God, celebrated beginnings and grieved endings and offered up to God everything in between. The Sunday School rooms, the Fellowship Hall, the Big Backyard – the holy places where our faith has been nurtured and grown. And there are also the places more particular to our individual reception of the faith. My home church – just to walk into that sanctuary of my childhood and youth, to smell its familiar smell – is to be transported back along the landscape of my life to where faith first came alive in me. What are the holy places in the geography of your faith?

The next curious detail in our story, that of the repeated parting of the Jordan River, first by Elijah and then by Elisha – what does that tell us about the past of our faith? Most obviously it speaks to the fact that Elisha truly has received the prophetic inheritance from Elijah – he does

what only Elijah has just done or could do, part the Jordan River. But I think the meaning runs deeper. The dividing of the waters not only moves God's story forward from Elijah to Elisha, from generation to generation, but also moves the story backwards to what God had done to deliver His people at the Red Sea – that great moment of Israel's deliverance from their slavery in Egypt. Literally backed up to the Sea, with Pharaoh's chariots bearing down and the people preparing to die – when suddenly God makes a way forward where before there had been no way. And Israel was saved. God had redeemed His people from out of slavery and from out of certain death.<sup>7</sup> In other words, what the parting of the Jordan River suggests is not just that Elisha follows Elijah, but that our faith as a history – a holy history filled with holy moments, holy events which mark out the timelines of God's salvation story and which help us find our place in that story.

So, what are the holy events, holy moments for us? How about one night, in the fullness of time, when Mary brought forth her first-born son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths. Or one afternoon, some thirty or so years later, when that same Son was lifted up upon a cross, to give His life that we should be freed from our slavery to sin. Or that one morning, three days later, when He rose again from the dead, that we should be delivered from our own death. The Transfiguration, the Ascension, the day He met that Samaritan woman at the well or that day He fed five thousand by the shore – each moment a holy marker along the timeline of our faith. And to know those markers, to comprehend that timeline of God's mighty acts, to know the history of our salvation, is to be strengthened for our present moment, and given hope for our future. And, of course, there are the holy moments which have marked out the timelines of our own personal salvation stories. Moments in our lives when God drew particularly close or worked in us in a way that was particularly meaningful. What are the holy moments, holy events in your faith story?

And then that last curious detail, Elijah testing Elisha at each stop – testing him to see whether he would continue to follow, would continue to be true to God's calling to be Elijah's successor. I think that is exactly what is going on there – Elijah testing Elisha before the succession can be accomplished. Elijah taking one last chance to mentor his student and aide and prophet-to-be. In other words, I think what this testing is all about is a reminder that our faith comes also with a holy genealogy. With a whole host of heroes and teachers and mentors and friends who have gone before us, and from whom we have inherited both our faith and their examples of how to live out that faith. As Elisha is the heir to Elijah, so we are the spiritual heirs to both Elijah and Elisha, to both Moses and David, Peter and Paul, to St. Augustine and Martin Luther and John Calvin and to all who have lived the faith before us and then passed it on to us. And to know their stories, to have received their legacies, to participate in the faith they have bequeathed to us is to find strength and encouragement, challenge and assurance as we live out our faith as the people of God in our day. Says the letter to the Hebrews: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”*<sup>8</sup>

And, of course, we each have our own personal holy genealogy of those who have mentored us and passed on the faith to us. Our parents perhaps. Or a particular pastor or Sunday School teacher or youth leader. A caring friend in a Presbyterian Women's Circle or a wise mentor in the adult choir. Who would you name in your own holy genealogy? Who, in your past, has given shape to the faith you possess in this present moment?

Miroslav Volf, who teaches at Yale, tells of someone who influenced his faith – and does so with a striking metaphor:

*Can an arrow forget the bow that set it flying? Many an arrow does, even though its very flight is a testimony to the bow's influence . . .*<sup>9</sup>

“*Can an arrow forget the bow that set it flying*” – who was that bow in your faith? When we remember and honor those who have come before us – from Peter and Paul all the way up to those persons in our own lives, we are empowered by their example, we are blessed by the gift of faith they have imparted to us.

Which leaves us with one last curious detail in our story – actually, this may be the only detail which isn't curious – that of the mantle of Elijah being picked up and worn by Elisha. The mantle clearly represents not only Elijah's role as God's prophet in Israel – which Elisha now has become – but also Elijah's spiritual power as God's prophet, something recognized immediately when he is met by the prophets of God at Jericho. So, we get the significance of the passing of the mantle in this story. But what does the passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha mean for us?

It is, I think, a parable of the fact that God will always make a way into the future for His church – from generation to generation. A symbol of His promise that even the gates of hell shall not prevail against His church. God's church, says this act of the passing of the mantle, has a holy past – but also, by the power and providence of God – shall always also possess a holy future. Which gives the church, in every age, courage for the facing of the present.

But so also this passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha is a reminder of how exactly God creates that future for His church. That He does so – let us say it again – from generation to generation. From one generation to the next generation, one at a time, God creates a future for His church. By the faith being faithfully passed on from one generation to the next, God leads His church forward to His Kingdom.

Which has special meaning for us here this morning. We have been reading this story as if we were Elisha, receiving that blessing of holy geography, holy history, and holy genealogy from Elijah and from all who have gone before. But in this last bit, the passing of the mantle of faith from generation to generation, we are being invited to understand that we are also, and at the same time, Elijah – the one passing on the faith to the one who comes after.

In other words, in our day and in our time and in this holy place, our job as God's church, God's people, is not only to remember and receive the faith from those who have gone before us – but also to pass that same faith on to those who will follow us. In fact, this is one of our most important jobs as God's church. To teach our children and youth – and, indeed, they are “ours”, all of ours, through their baptism into the family of faith – to teach our children and youth the holy geography, the holy history, and the holy genealogy of the faith which we have received from those who have gone before us. That they too, in their time and in their turn, might not only possess that faith and all its blessings, but also that they too may pass it on to those who will follow after them. As Christ leads His church forward, from generation to generation.

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<sup>1</sup> I Kings 19:15-21.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua 6.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua 3.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 14.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 12:1.

<sup>9</sup> Miroslav Volf, "An ultimate somebody," Christian Century, Vol. 125, No. 21 (October 21, 2008), p. 57.