

The Company of Prophets
2 Kings 2:1-15
Rev. Dr. Anne-Marie Hislop
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It strikes me that things are getting a bit backed up over there in England just now. As the world celebrates the birth of yet another possible heir to the throne, her Great-grandmama is still sitting on the throne. Grandpa Charles has been waiting about 67 years now; daddy William has been in the queue for 32 years and counting. And of course, her brother, Prince George, has first claim in this new generation. Although there is something poignantly sad about that line of relatives waiting for their loved one to die out of the job for which they have been groomed, it is also getting a bit comical with three generations of monarchs-in-waiting stacked up. To a lesser degree and certainly in a less public way, all of us throughout life form up such a line of succession. We're the kids; then we are the adults; then when our parents are gone suddenly we are the front of the line – and that's only the succession as written in the family. In my life time we have had eleven Presidents of the United States counting Mr. Obama. Each was certainly important and powerful in his time (we may differ on which were the great ones and which the clinkers), but each was replaced by the next. The Catholic Church has had 7 popes in my lifetime – 266 since the apostle Peter. In my 1st church – St. Andrew Presbyterian in Davenport, Iowa, which celebrated its 150th while I was their pastor – I was the 25th pastor. (One previous pastor was the grandfather of Henry Wallace, Vice President of the United States from 1941-1945) Whether we like it or not, transition, succession, moving up and moving on is and has always been part of the human experience.

Our text this morning is the end of the story of Elijah, prophet of God. It is also the beginning of the story of Elisha, prophet of God. Although his story really begins here, Elisha had first appeared earlier in the text when Elijah called him by tossing his mantle over the younger man. When this symbolic act occurred, Elisha left his home and became Elijah's disciple traveling with him, serving him, learning from him. After that calling, the text does not mention Elisha again for quite a while. Elijah continues to proclaim God's word challenging Israel's kings. Then quite abruptly the text says, "Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal." There has been no indication that Elijah is old or ill; there is no statement about Elijah wanting to die as there had been earlier in the story; there is no conversation about an end between God and Elijah. It is simply God's time. God has decided that Elijah's time is done – Elisha's time is about to begin. The journey carries symbolism as Elijah retraces the places important to Israel's religious history ending by crossing the Jordan River. Elijah taps the water, which separates yielding dry ground. The action evokes the parting of the Red Sea by Moses, but also the parting of the waters of the Jordan River by Joshua. Joshua was leading the people into the land; Elijah is leaving. In the background in each place in our text there is a company of prophets – prophets associated with the various holy shrines of the people. Like a chorus in an ancient Greek play, these companies of prophets serve to voice an element of what is happening. At first they remind Elisha over and over that God is about to take his beloved teacher from him. They too carry the word of the Lord, just as Elijah has; just as Elisha will. They are the ongoing prophetic presence throughout this transition, the reminder that God's word continues to be heard at all times. At the Jordan River, the company of prophets also serves as witness as Elijah parts the water. Elijah's question to his younger disciple is moving "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you." It is a

wide open question yet sensing his call, Elisha asks to inherit a double share of Elijah's spirit. The request echoes the position of an eldest son and heir, who traditionally inherited twice as much as a younger brother. Elisha wants Elijah's spirit in order to carry on the work – let me be like you, only more; let me have what I need to do what is required. Then in a grand display, Elijah is gone in the whirlwind accompanied by fiery horses and chariot. The fact that Elisha has seen his teacher leave affirms that he will, indeed receive a double share of Elijah's spirit. The fact that Elisha can part the waters of the Jordan as he crosses back into the land affirms this gift for Elisha, for the company of prophets who watch, and for us. God's transition has been smooth.

While it might seem that this text is primarily about Elijah and Elisha, it actually is primarily about God and God's word. The companies of prophets serve not only as a chorus poking Elisha about his impending loss of Elijah. They also stand as the emblem for the continuity of God's presence and of God's word. The prophets represent the continued availability of people who will proclaim the word of the Lord even as one prophet passes on and a new one is raised up. They communicate that ministry in God's name will go on. They represent continuity even as God always moves forward in raising up new leaders: after Abraham came Isaac then Jacob; after Moses came Joshua. In due time, Jesus claimed, taught, and anointed leaders for his church- leaders chosen to carry on his work; to keep the word of God flowing. That pattern, as we noted a few moments ago, is not limited to scripture. In human communities of all types, but especially in the church, God equips and calls new leaders for God's ministries and God's mission in the world. A stroll through the stories of the Bible will tell us very quickly that God's leaders, even the big name ones, are highly flawed human beings. When Elisha asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit, he was not asking for or getting perfection. Elijah was obedient to God – a good thing. Elijah was, at times, courageous, but at other times, not so much. The story of his flight into the Sinai when he felt threatened by Queen Jezebel, shows that Elijah was prone to exaggeration, capable of burn-out, had self-doubts at times and even had a hard time trusting that God would protect him when the chips were down. Elijah could be a bit of a showman, who was not above a bit of taunting of his opponents – he cooked up and, of course, won, a competition with the prophets of the pagan god, Baal. He could be inconsistent – he fled in a panic because Jezebel wanted to kill him, then begged God to do just that. Elijah was not perfect; Elisha would not be perfect either. They were just two people of faith doing the best they could.

We at Northminster, while we have been walking together through an extended period of transition, have reached a final moment of change. While I am certainly not Elijah – never have been, though I certainly have as many flaws – and likely some of the same ones – and Michael is certainly not Elisha, we too are just two people of faith doing the best we can. Neither one of us walks on water; neither of us can part the river no matter the tool in our hands. It is time for passing on the mantle. We are but two leaders - a changing of the guard in the pastoral position; a changing of the occupant of that lovely, sunny corner office. The continuity from before I came, from before Jessica came, from before Mike Youngblood came; the continuity during this transition and on into the future is the company of prophets present – all of you. God's continuity is not only or even mainly in the pastors who serve with you. God's continuity is in this body along side of whom pastors minister and lead. Do not object to being called the company of prophets, sisters and brothers, for each of you carries the word of God forward passing it on to

the next generation and the next. I hope as you and Michael bond together and grow in faith and ministry together, that you will grant him the privilege of truly being a prophetic voice among you. That will mean giving him room to say things that you do not always want to hear; giving yourself space to step back when the word of God has stung a bit to calm down and consider what the Spirit has said through Michael from your pulpit. That is not easy, yet if you truly believe that God has called and raised up this new pastor to lead this community called Northminster Presbyterian Church, how can you not let God's prophet speak among you? How things will be; what direction this church will take in ministry and mission is now up to all of you along with Michael (and Jessica) as you discern God's calls together; as you work together to make God's calls your mission.

My time and Nutmeg's time has come to an end.

What's that, Nutmeg?¹

You don't want to leave? Well, I can understand that.

[Nutmeg speaks]

Yes, these are very nice people. I have loved being here, too.

[Nutmeg speaks]

Yes, I'm glad that you really, really enjoyed the music in worship. It has been wonderful. I have enjoyed it too. What's that?

[Nutmeg speaks]

Yes, I have to leave. Ethics require that I get out of the way so that the Michael and Jessica and this congregation can become a team and do wonderful ministry together.

[Nutmeg speaks]

No, you cannot just stay without me, Nutmeg. We are a team.

[Nutmeg speaks]

Yes, I know you hate change. Yes, it is sad to leave these wonderful folks. I'm sad, too. At least you leave knowing that you have done your job well, Nutmeg. Sunday-after-Sunday, you have faithfully reminded all these grown-ups not to take themselves too seriously.

Now, if you don't mind, as I was saying, my time and Nutmeg's time has come to an end. Out of love and sadness, excitement for you, and joy, I charge you with the following:

Keep the faith. Remember who you are and whose you are. As Christians, in all that we do, Jesus Christ is the center. As a community of faith, our worship together, prayer for and with each other, and study of the Word of God, form the basis and core of all that we do. Without a strong grounding in communal worship and prayer, we risk becoming just a group of generic do-gooders. Welcome the questions and doubts which individuals may have, but as a congregation do not be afraid to openly embrace Jesus, fully human, fully divine, as the courageous, focused, determined, solid human being he was.

Keep the hope – keep on keepin' on. Being intentional is important. Northminster is a healthy size, but it is easy to try to do too much, which never works out well. Even Fourth Pres with its 6000 members cannot do it all, so choose wisely. Don't fall into the habit of letting some among you carry most of the load just because they will. That means paying attention to each

¹ Nutmeg, a teddy-bear, has been the symbol of Pastor Anne-Marie's ministry. Whenever Pastor Anne-Marie preaches, Nutmeg is somewhere in the front of the sanctuary. Nutmeg's job is to remind the grown-ups not to take themselves too seriously.

other; challenging the one who is taking on too much; resisting the temptation to pile more on them because they won't say no, and, gosh, stepping up more yourself where you can. Burn-out serves no one well.

Give yourselves permission to fail. Give yourselves permission to re-evaluate a ministry or mission and drop it if necessary. That's ok. Don't be afraid to try a new thing, but know why you are doing it; evaluate whether it did what you had in mind. If something really falls short, have a good cry, all involved go for ice cream, and move on to discerning what the Spirit has in mind now that that did not work out.

Stay rooted in love. Love one another as Jesus loves you, but also love others *as you love yourself*. That means take care of you! For some of you, that will mean learning to say 'no' more often. Take care of you so that you have the energy, stamina, interest, joy, and excitement to follow God's call. And take care of Michael. Pastors are people, too, which means that they function best when they get enough rest, have companions in the way to share the work and burden, and take time to feed their souls. Both Jessica and Michael will function better if you are flexible about having them at committee meetings. Sometimes simply knowing you can call the pastor if you need her or his input ought to be enough. You are a wonderful, dedicated, educated group of folks. Much of the work at those meetings can happen without the pastor sitting there. Give them a break; just fill them in well later. Ask Michael (and Jessica) how he (or she) is doing when you have time and space to really listen. Let them know that they are appreciated. While comments about a particular sermon or class are wonderful, they are very specific. If you're glad your pastor is here over time, say it! If you think he's doing a good job in general, say that. Insist that your pastor takes his days off and respect those. Be sure his vacations happen, too. A little attention to the care and feeding of your pastors goes a long way towards creating an environment in which pastors and congregation can thrive together.

Just as God raised up Elisha to follow Elijah, so too God has raised Michael up to join you on the journey. I don't know Michael much at all, but I can guarantee you that he does not know right now where you all are going. I'm pretty certain that God's call to him is to step in beside you and help you find your way. I am excited for you and for him because I believe that this community of faith is called by God to do wonderful ministry. God does not make mistakes. Unlike the rest of us, God always knows what God is doing.

Last, dear ones, play – yes, play – like your life depends upon it. We are called to be like little children, if we want to enter God's kingdom. Do not ever take yourselves too seriously, for doing so kills creativity, bogs us down in rules and process, and puts the lid on passion for the mission of God in the world.

It is time for me to go. You all have been a blessing to me and you all have made me a better pastor. Though I am sad to leave, sad not to walk with you on the next steps of your journey and the next and the next, I am excited for you. God's wisdom is never wrong, so I go with excitement to the next phase of my journey. I go with gratitude for each one of you.