

TAKING UP THE MANTLE - July 10, 2016

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 (9)

UNISON: Psalm 30

HYMNS: 1) 43 "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" 2) 499 "In All Our Living" 3) 358 "God of the Prophets"

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Christ sets us truly free.

People: Jesus, give us the power to be servants of your love!

L: Christ asks us what we truly want.

P: Jesus, give us the power to be servants of your love!

L: Christ offers us God's righteous realm.

P: Jesus, give us the power to be servants of your love!

INVOCATION & LORD'S PRAYER

Faithful and purposeful God, you ask much more of us than mere affection. You challenge us to walk beside you, witnessing your glory, and carrying on your mission. Give us the faithfulness of Elisha, so that we may share the good news of your redeeming love and your tender care for all creation. Be with us as we pray: Our Father...

## **The sermon**

It's been a challenging week in our country. Terrible news, more and more terrible every day. Forces of hatred and discrimination and fear are driving a wedge between us and moving us farther and farther from that lofty goal expressed on our currency: E pluribus unum—out of many, one. The way we've been doing things as a nation has clearly failed to address the fault lines still between racial and ethnic and social and cultural groups of people. And in this time, a time of great transition in American society, a time when we wonder what the path into the future will look like, in this time people of faith, followers of Jesus, have something very real to offer the world we live in.

Our scripture today tells of another time of transition, the change of prophetic leadership from Elijah to his disciple, Elisha. When I hear this story my mind starts singing to me right away: "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home; Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home." This spiritual, written by enslaved people as an expression of hope beyond the trials of this world, is a statement of faith, that God will act, that God will be God. It takes the Bible story and extrapolates from Elijah's extraordinary departure into the hands and home of God. A powerful hope for all God's people.

But that is not the only thing that is going on in this story. The setup is that Elijah, after his showdown with the prophets of Baal and his experience of God's presence in sheer silence after earthquake and wind and fire, went forth and called a young farmer, Elisha, to leave his father's fields and take up a wandering prophetic ministry. Substitute fisherman and nets for farmer and fields and you hear the echoes of Jesus calling Peter. Elisha takes up the call, and alongside his master learns so much about listening for God's word of challenge and calling, sharing that word, and acting in the world.

Today's verses tell about the end of that mentor/disciple relationship. A time of transition. A time when the future is unknown. A time when it's fair to wonder, where do I find God in this?

In this story, the emphasis is on the otherness of God, the way that God's reality is so far from our ability to perceive it that it takes extraordinary forms: a whirlwind, a flaming chariot. God is transcendent here: far beyond human understanding. We push against that, as Christians: in the life of Jesus, we recognize, in the incarnation, the imminent presence of God. In fact, both things are true about God: always the transcendent other, whom we are incapable of perceiving except in startling otherworldly experiences, like a burning bush or a thundering voice surrounded by flames....or the sky splitting open and a dove descending. God is so transcendent that if you don't keep your eye and ears open, you might not hear the voice speaking, you might not perceive God's constant IMMIDENT presence.

Because God is very much present in the world, all the time. Our faith is based on God's incarnation in the person of Jesus, who lived and walked and talked and ate and slept and taught among human beings....until the forces of this world killed him. And then, the imminence of an incarnate God was overtaken by the transcendence, the inexplicable, unworldly act of

resurrection. And so among God and people there is always movement, a kind of dance between the otherness and the nearness of God.

We need to remember this because if we seek God in worldly things, we will be chasing in the wrong direction, and we will run the risk of offering up our things for God to ratify instead of seeking God's guidance for our actions. So many times this week I've tried to explain what's happened to myself, find meaning in all the deaths, in the things that can be known. But this story, this ascension of Elijah, and in fact all of Elijah's adventures, are reminders to me that we are supposed to be looking not to events but to GOD to find meaning.

This story, of the flaming chariot, is also a story of great earthbound hope, when we turn our focus to Elisha. Surely, the realization that his master is leaving was alarming to Elisha! Remember the New Testament story of how Peter reacted to Jesus' announcement that he would be leaving soon: "Surely not, Lord! Say it isn't so!"

Elijah tells Elisha that he's going and that Elisha should stay put. But Elisha does NOT do that. Three times he's told, three times he refuses. Whether it's the road to Jerusalem or the river Jordan or the roads we are following, the disciple stays true to the master in spite of discouragement and fear and difficulty.

In his going along with Elijah, there surely is suspense in Elisha's heart. What will happen next? How will he go on when his master is really gone? Will God be with him? We have those kinds of questions too, in our experiences of waiting for events to unfold. Will our country be racked by racial conflict? Can our police really function the way we need them to? Is there something we can do?

The first thing to do is what Elisha does: stay faithful, and act according to what you know to be true about God. Elisha doesn't know if he will be the one to succeed Elijah. He doesn't know what the challenges and the charges will be. The future is unclear. But he chooses not to sit down and wait for a sign, not to wait for instructions, not to go on a solitary meditation journey or to hide in a cave, but instead to rely on what he knows about God from his learning. Elisha—and we—need to participate in events and watch closely for the signs and listen closely for the calling of God in the midst of what is happening. You know what this process is: discernment. Asking for the Spirit

to open our minds as we act on what we already know: to love God and love one another. To care for our neighbor as ourselves.

Elisha's watching aggravates the other prophets, the ones that Elijah has trained. They quiz him: Do you know? What now? And he answers, "Be silent." When he and Elijah reach the river Jordan, Elisha watches his master do a miracle; rolling up his mantle he hits the water and it parts, and they cross. Finally, Elijah acknowledges his pupil's presence in spite of orders, and asks "What can I do for you?"

Well, I can think of many things that I'd ask a miracle-worker to do for me if I had the chance! My first thoughts are all situational: cure cancer, end hunger, save us! But those are reactive to circumstances, and discernment is about taking a proactive view, one that prepares the heart and spirit instead of making a to do list. Elisha gets it: he asks for the spirit Elijah has had—a full inheritance—double strength!! He's asking for the job of prophet first class. He knew from Elijah's story what that means...And surely he also knew that Elijah would say, I can't give you that, young man. Only God can. All I can say is, keep your eyes open and watch for a sign, if you see the sign, you will know that God is acting in you.

**Our times require us to do the same: ask for the Spirit and then put ourselves out in the world doing God's will, trusting God to speak and act.**

Next two weeks, you'll hear two North Church people tell their stories. Stories of how they put themselves in God's way, by sharing skills, by undertaking journeys to strange lands, by learning new things, by taking a chance and trusting that they would discover God's guidance. And in both cases, God has been in it, in ways both expected and unexpected. We all need to practice this scary kind of trusting action. Our world needs us right here, right now, as peacemakers, as bringers of aid, as a people convinced of God's goodness and guidance, a people dedicated to love and care of all God's children. We can ask questions about the systems that pit people against one another. We can advocate for the kind of dialogue that needs to take place around issues of race and safety. They are complicated issues. There will need to be much listening and much hearing. The principles of pluralism that I shared last week are very important as we look for a path forward from the shootings of two young black men and five police officers. It is not a time for simplistic answers or slogans or explanations. It's a time

to engage with our neighbors, to ask one another and especially those who are unlike us, "what does this mean to you?" and listen to the answer. It's a time to see ourselves as engaging in an encounter of commitments: not erasing ourselves or anyone else in superficial agreement but trusting that we can come together despite differences, and listen and talk and listen some more.

Elijah did see Elijah taken up to heaven, with a chariot of fire and a whirlwind. He expressed his shock and grief. And then, in the sight of all the prophets who were watching, he picked up his master's mantle, and rolled it up, and struck the water....and the gift had been given. The power was there. The water parted, and Elisha stepped forward into an unknown future...on the path that God was opening before him.

Jesus was fond of saying to all whom he taught, let those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, see and hear what I am saying, and learn from me, and follow me. Now is our time, a time when we can truly be the body of Christ for the sake of the world. Time to take up the mantle and act in faith, with God, the God who knows us and loves us and redeems the world, as our helper.