

“Sometimes Change Must Be Worn”

Sermon Preached By

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Rensselaerville, New York

July 28, 2013

TEXT: And as they went on and talked, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up in a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and cried "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?"

2 Kings 2, 11-14b

Since 2007, Mary and I have found our church home in the Zion United Church of Christ in Stroudsburg, PA. So, the United Church of Christ, as a denomination, is new to us. In the United Church of Christ we often remind each other (and anyone else who's willing to listen), that God is still speaking. This allows us to convey something truly important about God. God didn't speak only in ancient times. When the final word of the Bible was put into place, that did not mean that God had lost interest in human kind, nor that God was through instructing and coaching us. God still has important new things to say to us.

If this is true, then the church has a very powerful tool of insight at its disposal, and a huge responsibility to the society around us. It is up to us to be alert to what God is saying, and our responsibility creatively and attractively to convey what God is saying to the society around us, if organized religion is not only going to adapt to change but to shape that change.

The strange story that forms our Old Testament lesson this morning really wants to help us understand this. No matter how bad things get—no matter how seriously we have let God down—no matter how often we have sinned against God or each other—God still seeks us out and continues God's conversation with us.

Elijah and Elisha lived in an era when prophets were a recognized category of persons within Israelite society. Prophets were people who "spoke for"—in Greek, *propheto*—God. They were trained for their work, and were authorized by society to speak what they had come to understand was God's will for any situation. In the time of Elijah and Elisha, one of the prophets was selected to be God's chief representative. For twenty-two years Elijah had been that person, throughout the reign of King Ahab over God's people, Israel.

Now Elijah had reached the end of his life. God had determined that Elisha should succeed Elijah as the chief prophet. This morning's lesson is the story of the transition from one chief prophet to another. This is not only the account of an official

transition, it is an intensely personal story. Clearly Elijah and Elisha had become very close friends, with an almost father/son relationship. They both understood that Elijah was not going to survive the particular journey in which they were involved.

The passage makes clear that there was reluctance to speak openly about Elijah's impending death, but then, suddenly, Elijah asked Elisha what Elisha wanted to inherit from him. Elisha suggested that what he wanted was "the double portion" of Elijah's spirit. In ancient Israel, any person's estate was divided into a number of shares equal to the number of sons plus one. Every inheritor then received one share, except that the oldest son received "the double share." Elisha was asking for two things: Place—he was asking that Elijah designate Elisha as the one to succeed to Elijah's role as chief prophet; and Power—that the power of the Spirit of God be given to him. Elisha's later career proves that he did, indeed, receive this double inheritance.

Elijah was then taken to heaven by fiery horses and chariot, in a powerful whirlwind, and Elisha saw Elijah's face as he passed into glory. When the dust settled, there at Elisha's feet was Elijah's mantle. This mantle, or cloak, seems to have been a powerful symbol of the prophetic office. Elijah had used it earlier to create a path through the Jordan River, striking the water with it, resulting in a dry path by which Elijah and Elisha could cross to the other side.

Upon finding the mantle at his feet, Elisha tore off and tore up his own outer clothing and took up Elijah's mantle. He walked to the edge of the Jordan River and ran a test, to see if the power of Elijah--God's power through Elijah—had been inherited along with the mantle. It surely had to be with his breath held that Elisha struck the water with Elijah's cloak. The waters rolled back, just as they had for Elijah. The position and the power of chief prophet now clearly belonged to Elisha. From that moment to the end of his life, the mantle fit Elisha and God spoke God's new word through him.

A lot of time has elapsed since this moment in ancient Israelite history. For a large portion of God's people, Elisha's mantle has fallen upon Pope Francis. For our Roman Catholic friends, Francis functions today in the same way Elijah and Elisha did in their time. But, we who are Protestant understand that the work of hearing and proclaiming God's new word is the work of the whole church. We believe that Elijah's mantle was passed to Elisha and that same mantle has now been passed to us. It lies at our feet.

We understand ourselves all called to speak on God's behalf. We're all to be prophets together. It is now up to us to be prophets—not individually, each uniquely speaking—but together, learning to speak as the church, discussing together and learning together, until we can speak with one informed, patient, convincing voice. Until it becomes possible not only for the church to adapt to change, but, indeed, to lead change.

We are to determine in every instance what it is God desires to have happen. And then to get busy doing it. So, the ball is in our court. The mantle is at our feet. Are we willing to pick up that mantle and bravely test what it is that God is calling us to be and to do?

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July 22, 2013