

# ALWAYS ONE MORE STEP TO TAKE

Sermon, February 14, 2021

Officer Installation and Ordination

Texts: II Kings 2:1-14, Mark 9:1-8

Today's Old Testament reading is the sole scriptural source of the spiritual we just sang (*"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"*); it's the one and only place in Scripture where we see this Sweet Chariot "swinging low, comin' for to carry someone home." This reading also tells the story of one of two biblical characters who don't face death. Apparently, Elijah does not die an earthly death; he is whisked up and taken into heaven by this sweet chariot, swingin' low ... not to be "seen" again in this world until that day in our Gospel reading when he meets with Moses and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration! The other Biblical story of the one other person who did not face an earthly death is found in Genesis 5:24, *"Enoch walked with God, and then he was no more, for God took him."* It's almost as if both Enoch and Elijah walked with God so long and so closely that eventually God just said, *"Why don't you just walk on home with Me?"* and He took them straight to Home without the transition of earthly death. Enoch and Elijah ... two men who really knew what it meant to walk with God (*not only is this the story about Elijah being taken up into heaven, it is also about Elisha assuming the mantle of the departing prophet, taking up the mantle of leadership, which makes it an appropriate scripture for today, as we ordain and install all church officers elected at our Annual Meeting last January*).

On our journey through this life, we sometimes think the most important thing is getting ahead, seeing how far we can go, how much we can do, or seeing how much we can get. But it really isn't any of those things. The most important thing in life is learning to walk with God. *"Walking with God"* is the way to live life well; keeping in step with God is the way to genuine life. Heaven is a wonderful place because God is there, and there we will see Him face to face in all His unveiled glory. But we can also know something of His presence today while we are still on the way to our heavenly destination. In fact, it might be said that the goal of the church's ministry is to help us walk with God, to be "at home" with God, even while we are still *"on the way home"* to Him. Walking with God, step by step, day by day, is the way to life ... full, abundant, eternal life ... a life that begins here and now.

In fact, it is when we *stop* walking with God that we get into so much trouble. When we think we've "arrived." When we stop moving, when we stop praying, we stop taking steps forward in faith ... before long, we have a stagnating faith and even stop living according to our faith. If we want to walk with God, we have to know God is on the move. So to walk with Him, we also have to be on the move ... always learning, always trying, always improving. So to walk with God, we are always learning, always trying, always improving. We weren't made to live our lives stuck in a rut! As someone once put it, a "rut" is only a grave with the sides knocked out. With God, there is always more to do, always more to know, always more to accomplish, always more to enjoy ... and there is always one more step to take. In deference to Valentine's Day today, let me say, *"it's almost like being in love,"* as that lyric from the old song puts it. To be in love is not just to make a once and for all commitment and then stop loving ... genuine love keeps on loving, keeps on taking steps forward in love, keeps on being attentive to the beloved, keeps on learning better ways to love and serve the beloved. When we stop doing that, our love can grow quickly cold.

Elijah knows he's about to depart this world; we don't know HOW he knows, but we are told he knows. So, he goes on a sort of farewell tour, a tour to familiar places, momentous places in the spiritual history of Israel. Elisha goes with him, and along the way I think Elijah is giving his young protégé three basic tests of leadership. He goes to Bethel, where Jacob, the grand patriarch, had his dream of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, a vision of the stairway to heaven. To Jericho, where the mighty walls dramatically tumbled from a dose of divine intervention, and then he goes on to the Jordan, where Joshua parted the waters ... it was soon after Joshua assumed the mantle of leadership from Moses, and the Hebrews entered the promised land. On each leg of this tour, Elijah tells Elisha, his apprentice and disciple, that he can stay behind. Elijah gives Elisha opportunities to back out of this whole leadership succession business altogether; Elisha can just go back where he came from; no harm done. But Elisha will not go back; this is the next step forward for him. Elisha may not be sure what is ahead, but one thing he is sure about is that he is called by God to take the next step, to follow through on his commitments, to walk as he believes God is guiding. He will stick with Elijah to the end and see this through.

By the way, that's a big part of what it takes to responsibly receive the mantle of leadership. Responsible leadership takes faithfulness, determination, tenacity. Will you stick with it, Elisha? Will you stick with it's fun and exciting, and when it's demanding? When it's encouraging and when it's discouraging, when it's easy and when it's difficult, when it's popular and when it's lonely? To paraphrase that great theologian ... Woody Allen

... "80% of success in life comes from just being there." "Being there" as in the sense of "staying there" ... not staying put, but faithfully and doggedly staying with it, each step of the way. Leadership is about dependable faithfulness. Elisha passes this first "test." He exhibits steady, faithful dependability, come what may. He won't leave.

Elijah and Elisha come to the final stop, the river Jordan, not far from where Joshua had assumed the mantle of leadership from Moses. Elijah takes off his mantle, this symbol of his prophetic office; rolls it up and snaps it like a beach towel against the water, and the river parts for both of them. They cross over on dry land, then Elijah asks his young protégé, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" Elisha answers with a request that is both humble and bold. "Please let me inherit a double portion of your spirit."

The request most likely refers to the Israelite custom that a firstborn son receives a double portion of a family inheritance. If I was a part of this culture, I would have to divide my "vast" estate into four portions: Steve would get two-fourths, Lydia one (*even though she was my first born, she wasn't my first born son*) and Hannah the other ... and they could argue about it the rest of their earthly lives, but that was the custom! Elisha is asking to have the status of Elijah's firstborn son. It's a *bold* request; Elisha is asking to be designated as Elijah's true successor, his spiritual son. But it's also a *humble* request, because he knows he cannot take over Elijah's ministry without some major help; whatever it is that Elijah has, Elisha knows he will need double in order to make it. Bold because he steps up to the task. Humble because he knows he can't do the task alone; he knows he will need at least a double dose of spiritual help! Sometimes people are just bold ... they step up and say, "I'll do it!", but they get in over their heads as they try to do it all themselves and can wind up doing more harm than good. At the other extreme, sometimes people are so painfully aware of their perceived inadequacy and insecurity that they never get up the courage to say "yes" at all! They may be genuinely gifted, talented, experienced in more ways than they may even realize, but they just never step up to the leadership plate. Genuine leadership takes both. It takes the bold courage to say yes, and the quiet humility to depend on God's power ... never one without the other. Elisha passes this second test.

Elijah says, "You have asked a hard thing," and then offers one last test. "If you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours; if not, otherwise not." I think what's inferred here is that if he's going to make it as a leader and as a prophet, what Elisha needs most is the faith and the God-given ability to believe in and perceive spiritual reality. May God save us from those who would assume leadership who do not really and sincerely believe there is more to this world than what we see. May God save us from leaders who aren't eager to see things as God sees them. The test here is whether he really believes in, and has the God-given ability to perceive/discern, something of the invisible Reality behind the visible. The unseen reality of the spiritual realm is all around us, but in a dimension not normally seen. Once in a while, though, we do catch a glimpse. Once in a while you can sense a divine presence with you during a crisis moment. Once in a while you can almost sense the rush of angel wings in a third-grade Sunday School classroom. In short, once in a while you just sense and even glimpse the reality of the profound presence of God involved in the "whirlwind" of all happening about you. The longer and closer we walk with God, the more often such things happen; we gain a sort of sixth spiritual sense.

Well, Elisha sees it. He sees the spiritual reality in the whirlwind of things happening around them. They're walking and talking and suddenly the whirlwind blew, the chariot of fire came swingin' low to carry off Elijah, and Elisha saw it all ... and then he saw Elijah no more. Test three has been passed. As the whirlwind subsided and the chariot disappeared, Elisha then saw there on the ground at his feet the mantle of Elijah. The mantle of leadership; the mantle, this symbol of office, was left there for someone to pick up.

Now the whirlwind and the chariot of fire and the departure of Elijah are all fascinating, but here is the real high drama point of the story: Will Elisha step forward to pick up this mantle? This is a moment of monumental decision for him ... this seems to be the next step forward, everything seems to be pointed toward this moment, but it still remains a necessary step he must decide to take. The leadership mantle is lying there on the ground, at his feet, and he *could* just leave it there, and say, "Not me. Goodbye, Elijah. It's been fun, but I'm sure somebody else will pick up the mantle. There's just too much work, too much danger, too much rejection, too much sacrifice, too much responsibility in being a prophet. Let somebody else do it." But that's not what Elisha said. He stepped forward and picked it up. As soon as he picked up that mantle, I'm sure he was soberly aware he was taking upon himself all that went with it ... the responsibility, the hard work, the scorn as *well* as all the blessings the call would entail. But he was convinced this was precisely where God had brought him; he knew this was the next step forward.

I'm sure he, too, believed that the point of life, the way to life, is to keep walking with God ... because with God, there is always more to do, there is always more to learn, there is always more to accomplish, more to enjoy, and there is always one more step to take.