

Message Delivered at Christ Church

June 26th & 27th

TEXT: II Kings 2:1-14

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

So this past week there was an article in the paper about a fellow a lot of us know. His name is Don Cowles, and the article was in this past Monday's Business Section.

I met Don twenty-one years ago this summer. In 1989 I was an intern at St. Paul's Episcopal Church downtown where he and his family worship, and back then he was still with Reynolds Metals. We started chatting one Sunday between the services, and along the way became friends. And if you know Don, you know he's friends with lots of people.

Don left Reynolds in 2001, and since then has pursued the purpose of making Richmond a better place. He's still a member of St. Paul's. Over the years he's helped Richmond Hill to be born; he's been part of groups such as Hope in the Cities and Initiatives for Change; he serves on the board of the United Way. And several years ago he was one of the founders of a Richmond-wide ministry called the Micah Initiative that helps connect people like us with Richmond City Schools.

Hundreds of people in the Richmond area are part of Micah, including about twenty-five of us here from Christ Church. As God's people, we do CARITAS; and have a foot in Boaz and Ruth and the Peter-Paul Summer Camp. We participate in Habitat and Rebuilding Richmond. And we're also Micah people.

As is Don. Most of the story was about his mentoring relationship with a young man named Tod'quan. They get together a few times a week; they play; they talk about things that kids talk about; they go to baseball games; Don reinforces the basics—get your homework done, look people in the eye, stand up straight; please, and thank you, and how to give a firm handshake...little things necessary to making it in the world; things that parents teach, but which are often learned more effectively when someone other than a parent reinforces them or brings them to our attention.

Doing what Don does—and what other people do—in Micah; and what happens between us and our CARITAS guests (because it is a mutual ministry)--ain't really rocket science. Just passing it on. Taking what has been given, and then giving it away. Being with another, and sharing with them your life; and maybe your love; and maybe some of the wisdom God has given you over the years; offering another the blessing of presence; and receiving back the same. Passing it on, and receiving.

So there once was a prophet named Elijah. His was not an easy ministry. There was violence, and conflict, and exile. A whole lot of people didn't care for him. He is a strong character of strong character. But ain't nobody perfect, and that includes Elijah. He is liable to both debilitating self-pity and exaggerated self-importance. In I Kings 19 he bemoans before God that he is the only faithful person left in all of Israel. God tells him that he's mistaken, and almost to prove a point the Lord tells Elijah that it is now time to anoint his prophetic successor...a young man named Elisha. And that is today's story.

We know the ending to this story. Elijah is to be taken away. His work really isn't finished. There is still unfaithfulness in the land. The new king, Jehoram, isn't any better than his father, Ahab. But the Lord has issued instructions, and someone else is now to do the work

Elijah had been doing. And so Elijah is done. He is now going to learn what everybody learns at some point...the holiness of unfinished business

So I invite you to follow along with the story in your bulletin, because that's probably the only way what I'm going to say here will make sense...

Elijah and Elisha start walking. Like last week, the geography matters here. It paints a picture. They begin at a place called Gilgal; they then go about fifteen miles west to a town called Bethel; and then, they go to the city of Jericho. To us, this sounds like they're going from place to place with a purpose. But really, Jericho—where they finish--is only about a mile south of Gilgal--which is where they started. They're walk, in other words, is an aimless one--maybe because sometimes there are things before us so significant that the only way to get ready is simply to go for a walk with a friend.

Hebrew is an ambiguous language. As well, ambiguity is one of the things that makes a good story a good story, and gives us the chance to find our place in it. So at Gilgal and Bethel the same things happen, but they are open to different interpretations...take your pick.

At both places, Elijah tells Elisha to stay put. Whether he does so because he is grieving the end of his time with his friend; or grieving the end of his work; or even, possibly, testing his young charge is something we don't really know.

At both places, Elisha insists that he will follow. Whether he does so to demonstrate his faithfulness, or because he fears losing the blessing that is to come his way is something we don't really know.

At both places, there are the prophets who, like some Greek chorus, sound the ominous note to Elisha of what is to come. And whether he tells them to keep silent out of respect for his master or this moment, or simply because their inane babbling is diverting him from the purpose of staying by Elijah's side is something we don't really know.

You see, there are lots of nooks and crannies in this story for us to wander and use our own imagination and make it our own so that our own story might find a purchase in God's story.

But there is one more place for Elijah to go. So for the third time this whole drama takes place. This time Elijah is to go beyond the Jordan. And again, geography matters. Centuries earlier, it was from the wilderness beyond the Jordan that Joshua and the people of Israel emerged to receive the Promised Land. So now, Elijah parts the waters with his mantle and with Elisha returns to that wilderness. The symbolism runs deep here. Again, Elijah goes back to a place that matters. And this time, the prophets keep their distance.

It's only Elijah and Elisha—they're all alone--and both know what is to happen. Elijah offers to do one last thing for his charge...whatever it is that Elisha asks. "It's a big job, Master; and I'm only half the man you are. So give me a double portion of your spirit." Sometimes a question is just a question; and sometimes an answer is just an answer. But sometimes, like here, they are each something more. Elijah has tested Elisha one last time, and the young prophet has shown his wisdom not by asking for money, or power, or fame...but for the same spirit that has moved in his master.

In turn, one final time Elijah reveals his own wisdom. There are some things that are not ours to give; and it is no small grace to know the difference between what is ours and what is God's, and let it go. "That's not something I can give you, Elisha. If you see me taken, it will be yours; but if not, it will not. This is something God will decide."

Elijah is taken into heaven by the whirlwind, and Elisha does see. To rend one's garments was an ancient sign of mourning; though here, it may also make space for something new to happen...

Now a mantle is a cloak. To this point, it's been incidental to the story. But when we pick up the torch someone before us has been carrying, we sometimes need that tangible connection; we need something to carry, that reminds us of who has gone before; that helps us remember that the power of the generations before us lives on, and that God has been busy well before we ever walked this earth.

You know, when my dad died I asked my mom for this ring that was my father's. It has a Christian symbol on it...the chi rho. He wore it every day as a reminder of his faith. I don't wear it every day; but there are days I find it important to be reminded not just of my father, but of his faith, and the faith of my mother, and the faith of all those who have gone before. That I am not the first, and I will not be the last. And a lot of us have treasures like this...things we wear, or things in our home, or family Bibles on our bookshelves that are all more than what they appear to be and that connect us.

For Elisha, that treasure is Elijah's mantle. It is the cloak Elijah had worn; it's what he wrapped his face in when he met the Lord on that mountainside so long ago; it's what he had struck the water with when he and Elisha crossed the Jordan just moments ago. It is—at least to him—a holy relic.

Remember who Elisha is...just an immature sapling whose giftedness outstrips both his knowledge and experience. He is wise enough only to know that he needs the help of this icon. It's lying on the ground, and he dares to pick it up, and possibly with the quivering up-talk of a peach-fuzzed young man suddenly thrown into circumstances utterly beyond him, he strikes the water with Elijah's mantle and wonders more than asks "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?"

And exactly as they did for Elijah, and for Joshua before him, and Moses before him at the Red Sea, the waters part.

But there's something funny in this story; there's some Bible humor here. Remember that Hebrew is a language that lends itself to many understandings. The implication of the words in this particular translation is that the order of events here is he strikes; he speaks; the water parts. But again, the Hebrew is ambiguous. It can also be translated that actually he had to strike the water twice...he strikes; he speaks; nothing happens; he has to strike again; and then, the water finally parts.

Elijah only has to swing that mantle once. Elisha...well, he's still new at this; he's just a pup, and is still learning; he needs two swings before getting a hit.

This is the last time Elijah's mantle appears in the story of Elisha. Eventually, Elisha will stand on his own two feet. He will grow into how God is working in him, and he won't need Elijah's cloak to get things done. But we all need a little help to get started, and we all need those who went before us to pass on what they've been given.

There are teachings in this story about letting go and taking on; of receiving and giving; of putting down and picking up; of finishing and starting...in other words, things that happen in life all the time, and how God is present in all of them. There is a beautiful and touching humanity in both these characters that resonates across the ages.

God gives Elijah one last gift before the whirlwind...the opportunity to trust the untested one who walks in his footsteps. And God gives Elisha not just the vision, but the mantle...because sometimes we need a visible reminder of the invisible.

To Elijah, the Lord gave a precious responsibility. Not just the responsibility of prophecy, but also the responsibility of Elisha. And to Elisha, the Lord gives a new calling, but not before giving him Elijah to help him get started. The main character of the story, of course, is God...who gives to each new generation, and each new start, exactly what's needed to further the Lord's work; and that there is always a new beginning to each new ending.

And if it is there are lessons for us to take from this time, it may be these: for each of us there is an Elijah; probably more than one. For each of us, there are those persons God has placed in our lives to pass on the beauty of God's grace and the majesty of God's purpose. And so for a moment this week, I invite you to think about who those persons are and then maybe find one or two to thank. If their day has been a bad one, it will make it a good one; if their day has been a good one, it will make their day a better one. Everybody wants to know that they've mattered well.

And then, maybe like Elijah, or maybe more like my friend Don Cowles, we look for the souls God wants to put in our charge. Each one take one, and inch by inch the world becomes a bit more like the kingdom of God. "Each one take one" is a good thing to remember. May we never doubt that God has given each of us something to pass on...some word of hope, or encouragement; some gift of witness and grace; some trial the Lord has taken us through or promise God has fulfilled. We've each been given something that only remains alive to the extent it is paid forward to others; and it's a mistake to think that what we've been given is too small, or not worth the effort, to give it away. Because whether we believe what we've been given is big or small, for the Elishas in our lives, it will be just right...or at least enough. And what's lacking, God will give double.

This story has been read by the people of God for thousands of years, and it will continue to be read for thousands of years. And each time it's been heard, we've remembered those who have been our Elijahs. But the word of God calls us to action. And today, that action is to look for our Elishas so that when the generations to come hear this story read one more time, the Elijahs they remember are us.

The result won't be a new story written in scripture; probably won't even be an article in the newspaper. But certainly it will be a life changed for the better, and another story worth telling.