

## Faithful Service

### 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

<sup>1</sup> Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. <sup>2</sup> Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. . . .

<sup>6</sup> Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. <sup>7</sup> Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. <sup>8</sup> Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

<sup>9</sup> When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." <sup>10</sup> He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." "As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. <sup>12</sup> Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

<sup>13</sup> He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. <sup>14</sup> He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

This story of Elijah and Elisha was one of my favorite as a child. As soon as I learned at age 5 that we go through the process of dying and I wanted to avoid that experience and just be taken by a chariot and horses of fire into God's presence. Since then, I have learned that it is not likely to be my lot. However, Elijah had lived a life of faithful service and that is something we each can do.

When we think of a favorite mentor, we often ask ourselves: how has he or she nurtured us in our callings? This Elijah/Elisha story in the lectionary cycle narrates the passing of the prophetic mantle from Elijah to Elisha, thus providing a tutorial for our discipleship endeavors, helping the next disciple to give faithful service.

Several stages can be perceived in the process: inviting, developing, testing, parting, grieving, and confirming.

***Inviting.*** Following God's command (1 Kgs. 19:16), Elijah sought Elisha while the latter was plowing and cloaked him with his mantle. Although Elisha initially asked to kiss his parents goodbye, he ultimately sacrificed his oxen, thereby sealing his break with old ways of being (1 Kgs. 19:19-21). Elisha's request to bid farewell to his parents is akin to most of our initial reactions when we are called out of our daily routines and into new situations.

We often recognize that people with autism have difficulty dealing with change. One commentator mentioned that her daughter was diagnosed with autism. Among the many ways this stretched their family was the daughter's reaction to any change. Her initial reaction was always "No." However, once she had the chance to process the proposal, she would often accept it. Helping her to be unafraid of these constant invitations to change and open to new expressions of discipleship remains their biggest growth opportunity. The rest of us have the same issues with change. You know that Leroy and I went to Virginia at the first of the month. I noticed that the attendees usually sat with and talked with the people they came with, the members of their own congregation. We are all challenged by change, but need change to grow in our faithful service.

***Developing.*** Although Scripture makes no mention of Elisha between his calling and today's text, Elijah was busy pronouncing God's judgment upon Kings Ahab and Ahaziah. Since Elisha was serving Elijah, he was getting great on-the-job training! The early church knew the importance of on-the-job training. Immediately following Pentecost, the apostles welcomed 3,000 new converts who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Those four elements form the basis for Logos, a midweek ministry founded in 1965, which develops new disciples through Bible study, recreation, common meals, and worship skills. An ever growing team of joyously dedicated disciples perpetuate this high-yielding ministry. Such ways of developing disciples in time-intensive ministry is an excellent example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's insistence upon costly grace for the development of disciples. Bonhoeffer wrote,

Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace. Cheap grace is grace ... without costs. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living incarnate Jesus Christ... . Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock. It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives; it is grace because it thereby makes them live.

**Testing.** Elijah encouraged Elisha to stay behind three times, and each time Elisha insisted upon following. This parallels Peter's threefold denial of Christ in his passion, and the resurrected Christ's thrice asking Peter if he loved him (John 18:15-18, 25-27; 21:15-19). It is human nature to test the limits of love. Our own children test us to make certain we love them no matter how distinctively they are behaving. Elijah's example shows us that God calls us to keep loving God's children of all ages, even when we doubt their commitment or do not like their behavior.

**Parting.** Elisha's shock at the chariots of fire that separate him from Elijah reminds us that even anticipated separations are painful for those left behind. Lila Smith, Leon Holloway, Bill Dell, Bill Cruthers, Herb Smith, Bill Parker, Carl Huber, Tony Erwin, Ruth Young, Alice Cruthers, Patricia Harmon, Lillian Anderson, George Buck, Wilma Belcher, John Palmer, Jean Buttery, are just a few

of the faithful servants who have gone to be with the Lord in the short nine years I have served here. Some had long illnesses, and others were quickly taken, but each had their unique ministries...teaching, administration, keeping the church clean, hospitality and so much more. They served in their ministry capacities and were ready for God's chariot whenever it would take them. They understood because they knew their Bible well and because they knew they had faithfully raised children to walk in Christ's footsteps and had mentored countless others in their own transformational missions.

**Grieving.** Knowing Elijah would be taken from him did not minimize Elisha's grief; rather, it made his own ministry more poignant. Composer Giacomo Puccini wrote a number of famous operas. In 1922 he was suddenly stricken by cancer while working on his last opera, *Turandot*, which many now consider his best. Puccini said to his students, "If I don't finish *Turandot*, I want you to finish it for me." Shortly afterward he died. Puccini's students studied the opera carefully and soon completed it. In 1926 the world premiere of *Turandot* was performed in Milan with Puccini's favorite student, Arturo Toscanini, directing.

Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the point where Puccini had been forced to put down his pen. Tears ran down Toscanini's face. He stopped the music, turned to the audience, and cried out, "Thus far the Master wrote, but he died" A vast silence filled the opera house. Toscanini smiled through his tears and exclaimed, "But his disciples finished his work" When *Turandot* ended, the audience broke into thunderous applause.

Perpetuated ministries, faithful service, are richer for the connectedness they bring the body of Christ.

**Confirming.** Elijah knew Elisha would be his successor but left that revelation to God (1 Kgs. 19:16). Although Elisha asked to inherit a double share of Elijah's spirit, Elijah did not promise it to him; rather, he called Elisha to vigilance upon his

departure so that God's will might be revealed directly. When Elisha did see Elijah's dramatic departure, picked up his passed-on mantle, struck the water, and crossed over, he was confirmed in his new role. Who are we teaching to do faithful service? Whom are we nurturing? How are we nurturing them? Part of our own personal spiritual discipline must be the discipleship of others who might assume our mantles, as Elisha assumed Elijah's. Our task is to teach someone to do faithful service. Let it be so in our lives. **Carrie N. Mitchell**

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