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Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson

“PICKING UP THE MANTLE”

2 Kings 2: 1-14

Who is missing from your life today? Which place at the table is empty now? These are sobering moments—on this All Saints’ Sunday...to remember those who were once a vibrant part of our lives and are no longer with us. We don’t remember just names today. We remember faces and people. We remember shared times—times of sorrow and times of joy. We remember funny stories and eccentric quirks and personal relationships. We remember those who are our heritage, some who, on this very spot of ground, gave their money and prayed their prayers and loved their Lord so that you and I would have a church to call home today. If we stand in faith today, it is because we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Even so, it is time to move on. As Jesus affirmed in our Gospel from Luke today, **“God is God not of the dead, but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.”** We don’t have to worry about those who have gone before. God is taking care of them. As for us, we have to move on.

A man goes to a restaurant and orders a roasted chicken. When the food is ready and brought out, he is just about to dig in when the server comes back and says, “Sir, I’m afraid there has been a mistake. You see that police officer sitting over there? He is a regular customer, and he usually orders the roast chicken. The problem is, this is the last chicken in the house. I’m afraid I’ll have to take this dish to him and arrange something else for you.”

The guy gets really upset and refuses to hand over his chicken. The server walks over to the other table and explains the situation to the officer—a six-foot, 300-pound, badge-wearing hulk. A few minutes later, the officer comes over the guy’s table and say, “Listen, and listen good! That is MY chicken you are about to eat, and I’m warning you that whatever you do to that chicken, I’ll do to you. You pull out one of its legs, I’ll pull out one of yours. You break one of its wings, I’ll bread one of your arms.”

The guy looks at the chicken in front of him. He reaches for it, turns it over, and, with a smirk, kisses the tailbone. Then he says with a grin, “Your turn!”

Dear loved ones, today it’s our turn. On this All Saints Sunday we remember and appreciate all those who have gone before us, but it’s our turn now.

What does it mean to take our turn? Our reading from 2 Kings helps us to understand.

Elijah and Elisha were two prophets from the second age of miracles in the Bible. Their times were chaotic: the grandiose kingdom of Solomon had

disintegrated, and threats from neighboring enemies swirled around. Disaster loomed on the horizon, and those desperate times evoked some of the strangest experiences of God in all of Scripture. Our Old Testament reading describes one such unusual event. Elisha is following Elijah around, but the older prophet seems miffed and bent on losing his protégé.

“**Stay here,**” Elijah says to Elisha; “**the LORD has sent me to Bethel.**” Elisha refuses. Again Elijah says, **Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.**” Elisha follows him there, too. A third time Elijah says, “**Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.**” But again Elisha persists with the refrain, “**As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.**”

Have you ever tried to lose someone who was following you? Maybe it was your little brother, maybe it was a kid who was starved for affection that was acting like a pest. Maybe it was someone who threatened you. You tried every trick in the book, but they stuck to you like glue. That’s what Elijah was experiencing. He wanted to give Elisha the slip, wanted to stop him from tagging along behind him, but he couldn’t get rid of him.

Elijah couldn’t get rid of Elisha because Elisha didn’t want to go. But if we want to take our turn, there comes a time to let go. We have to let go when it’s time to take our turn.

Sometimes it can be really hard for us to leave the past behind.

A passenger in an Uber ride reached forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder to ask a question. The driver screamed, lost control of the car, nearly hit a bus, drove up over the curb, and stopped just inches from a large glass shop window. For a few minutes everything was silent in the car. Then the driver said, “Don’t *ever* do that to me again! You scared the living daylight out of me!”

The shook-up passenger apologized and said he didn’t realize that a tap on the shoulder would be so frightening, to which the driver replied, “I’m sorry. It’s not really your fault at all. Today is my first day driving Uber. I spent the last 25 years driving a hearse.”

It’s hard to let go of the past, especially when the past is people. It’s hard to let go of those who have meant so much to us. Elijah keeps telling Elisha to bug off, but Elisha refuses. When the company of prophets at Jericho tell Elisha that his master is going to be taken from him, the soon-to-be-abandoned prophet replies, “**Yes, I know, so be quiet.**” I know the time is coming. I just don’t want to talk about it!

If we could just get past our romanticized version of ‘the good old days,’ we would be so much better off. The cynics of the world feed our disappointment with descriptions of the past like, “A dollar was worth a dollar back then! Neighbors knew their neighbors back then! The church was overflowing with children back then! We didn’t have to lock our doors back then!”

Bob Hope remembered his ‘back then’ days: “Four of us slept in one bed. When it got cold, mother threw on an extra brother... I had six brothers. That’s how I learned to dance...waiting for the bathroom!”

Are you stuck in the past? Are you hanging on to what was? I knew a man who couldn’t let go of his dear, departed wife. Every single day of his life, for years and years, he made the trip to the cemetery 15 miles away. All his present life was consumed by the past.

Sooner or later we have *got* to let go of depending on those who went before us and do what God has called *us* to do. Isn’t it time...time to figure things out for ourselves? Healthy grown children cannot be dependent on parents who will soon be gone. Neither can a healthy church be one whose only support lies in the oldest members.

In the past 40 years I have had the funerals of a lot of prominent people in different congregations I served. Frankly, I have been disappointed in how few of them remembered the church in their wills—probably because Jill and I have the church written into our wills. Yet one day when I was complaining about this to myself, God taught me a lesson. God said, “It’s not the dead who are going to take care of this church. It’s the living. You need to let go.”

Few of us want to let loose of the past, particularly of those people from yesterday who have meant so much to us. But time marches on, and we have to let go. We have to let go because it’s our turn now.

A second thing we learn from Elijah and Elisha is this: We have to know what’s important when it’s time to take our turn.

Elijah crossed the Jordan miraculously by striking the water with his mantle. Then he turned and asked his protégé, “**Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?**” What do you want, Elisha? Why are you following me so closely? What do you expect from me anyway?

Elisha didn’t hesitate a second. “**Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,**” he said. Elisha wasn’t being greedy; the double portion belonged to the oldest son, the heir. Elisha wanted to inherit the *ministry* of Elijah. He wanted the gift of prophecy and the power of God. He wanted to speak the truths of God and demonstrate God’s power in the world.

What would you have asked for? What is important to you to get from those who have gone before? Hopefully, it’s more than material things.

What I see happening in the Christian Church in our country today troubles me greatly. We are so easily sidetracked by issues that miss the whole point of the Gospel. We argue about which way and when to be baptized, about who is acceptable to God and who isn’t, about whose political view is more righteous. Some pastors spend their whole preaching careers warning people about the end times when the present world is crumbling in front of their eyes. When we get to

heaven, do you really think that Jesus is going to grill us on our doctrine of baptism or how we interpreted Revelation, on how we voted or who we kept out of the church? Really? Don't you think that the Lord's main concern will be whether we loved God with all that we are and loved all those God put in our path? Isn't it right there in the Greatest Commandment and in all the parables of Jesus? Micah the prophet summed up all the ethics we need to have as God's people when he wrote, **“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”**

But what about all those people who want to get us off the track, who think our position on some social issue defines our faith? Consider this: Do you really want to be sidetracked so easily from the good news about Jesus who died so that all who trust in him may have the hope of eternity?

After a long absence from the stage, pianist Vladimir Horowitz was scheduled to perform in Chicago. Franz Mohr, the chief concert technician for Steinway and Sons, was assigned to make sure the piano was in perfect condition. He did so to the best of his ability but wasn't able to relax until Horowitz had given a brilliant rendering of his first number. As was his custom, the pianist left the stage—but he didn't return. Mohr was summoned backstage. “Where have you been?” asked Horowitz angrily. “I cannot play again. The piano stool is far too high!” Mohr nervously inquired as to the size of the problem. The famous pianist held up his hand, his thumb and forefinger about a quarter of an inch apart.

For a quarter of an inch Horowitz was ready to hold up the concert! How often in the church do people hold up the kingdom of God for some petty issue that doesn't matter in the end? We cannot be distracted from what is important, not if we are going to take our turn at steering the church of Christ.

Well, how would I know if I am being distracted in my own faith journey? I don't think it's too difficult to tell. Ask yourself this one question: “Who am I becoming?” Think about what kind of person you were twenty years ago, forty years ago, sixty years ago. Are you kinder now? Do you find it easier to love and accept people now? Are you more hopeful, more peaceful, more thankful, more generous now? Or are you becoming more rigid, more self-righteous, grouzier and more agitated? If we let the Holy Spirit of God work in us, shouldn't we be becoming more like Jesus—the Jesus who had compassion on people, the Jesus who healed the broken-hearted, befriended the lonely, and forgave sinners?

I don't know about you, but the people I admire in my past, the people I want to be like, were those in whose presence I felt the love of God. That's what I want a double portion of—their love of God. If we are going to take our turn, we need to know what is important.

The story in our text is so awesome and dramatic that I wish I could show you a video of it! Elijah and Elisha are walking along and talking when, all of a sudden, a chariot of fire and horses of fire appear out of nowhere and Elijah is swept up to heaven in a whirlwind. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Elijah is taken by some celestial tornado to a different place. Elisha keeps straining to see his mentor and cries out, **“My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”** Finally, he can see his beloved teacher no longer and grabs his clothes and rips them to pieces out of grief. Then he sees Elijah’s cloak lying on the ground. He picks up the mantle and rolls it up like his mentor did, and strikes the water of the Jordan River as he shouts, **“Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?”** The water of the Jordan splits, just like it did for Elijah, just like it did for Joshua who walked across on dry ground, just like the sea parted for Moses who led the people out of bondage from Egypt. Amazing, awesome events! Powerful reminders that God was now with the *new* generation! It’s a message to us today. The same power of God that belonged to our ancestors and mentors in the faith is available to us. We need to pick up the mantle because it’s our turn now.

Who have been the mentors in your life? Who has taught you the things of God? Besides your own parents, who has embodied the love of God, the truth of God, the hope of God to you?

My first mentor in the faith had been a military chaplain in World War II and the pastor of a large church in Ohio before coming to Northern Minnesota. He had left a large congregation to come to our little, struggling parish because he was tired of parishioners who were more concerned with things than people. He never wore a robe in worship and wore old overalls when he was working around the parsonage. If you didn’t know who he was, you would have mistaken Ralph Imes for some farmer-come-to-town. But he had a heart for people, and he loved kids, and he had a great sense of humor. He was the common people’s pastor before I ever knew that I would be a pastor.. and he molded who I became.

Another mentor in my life was a pastor at a church I attended while in college and seminary. Arthur Rouner was a New England Congregationalist who wore a long, black robe and stood tall and skinny in the pulpit. He had bushy silver hair that made him look like he had just stepped out of the wind, but he preached with passion—a passion for people to come to faith even in the high society circles he knew. Arthur would go to cocktail parties, sip on his drink, and talk about Jesus! And when he preached, you could hear the longing in his voice for those in the nation’s richest suburb to find their true purpose in life.

I have had other mentors, too—some who showed me humility, others who taught me grace, and some whose voices are still teaching me. Most of my mentors are gone now. I can’t go to them for advice; I can no longer learn by watching

them—only by remembering what they were like, like we’re doing today. You see, it’s our turn to pick up the mantle.

I once heard a seminar speaker talk about the “pew potatoes” in his church. You know what he meant, don’t you? We talk about “couch potatoes”—those people who come home after work, flop down on the couch with the remote and spend the rest of their waking hours surfing through channels and chowing down on snacks and beer. Well, pew potatoes are those who flop down in church after a hard week of life and don’t get up to do much else. They don’t volunteer for anything; they don’t seem to give a hoot about anything. They just come to *get* something. God surrounds their lives with blessing, fills their spirits with gifts, promises to lead them safely through life—and they act like, “Who me? You want *me* to do something? You’ve got to be kidding!”

Last weekend we had our Fall Fling to highlight all the ministries of Nativity in which you could get involved. Were you there? I hope so. Did you sign up?

Maybe we get frightened about taking our turn. What if we step up to the plate and strike out? What if we join the choir and sing offkey? What if we pick up the mantle and make a mess of things? It could happen, you know! We *could* blow it if we took over!

I think Elisha had some misgivings about taking over, too. He had doggedly followed Elijah. He had asked for a double share of his spirit. He had picked up the cloak left behind by his mentor’s dramatic flight to heaven. But when it came right down to it, he had his doubts. As he struck the water of the Jordan, he cried out, “**Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?**” Is God really going to do through me what he did through Elijah?

Do you have some of that hesitation today? Are you thinking, “Well, if God has left the future of the church in *my* hands, we’re *really* in trouble!” Don’t we doubt because we know ourselves too well? We know our failures; we know our sins; we know our problems.

As I grew older, I realized that those mentors in my life had their shortcomings, too. One day I overheard Rev. Imes lose his temper at a parishioner, and I was shocked. And Dr. Rouner left the congregation that he had spent so much of his life building with a broken heart. Nobody’s perfect...nobody but Jesus. But God doesn’t expect us to be perfect; the cross took care of all our imperfections.

Elijah left his mantle for Elisha; but someone greater has left his mantle for us to pick up. That someone is Jesus. All over the gospels we read about Jesus sending out his disciples in his name. Jesus left the future of the church in the hands of those who came after him. That includes you and me.

Today we stand in an unbroken line of witnesses from the past two thousand years who have loved God and lived for God and, sometimes, died for God. Now

it's our turn to keep the flame of hope burning. Will you do your part? Pick up the mantle!

Dear family, we have in our possession the greatest message this world has ever heard: that God is alive and loves us, that God accepts all of us and gives us power to live with hope and joy in this world, that God calls us children and invites us to inherit eternity. The world around us is full of desperate people—people living in the dark, people in pain, people who feel alone—people who need to know this God of ours. What will you do? Like Elijah of old, a mantle lies before you—Jesus' mantle. The God of Elijah and Jesus calls to you. Answer! Shout back, “Here I am, Lord! I'll take my turn.”

Amen.