

The Passing of the Mantle

1 Kings 19:19-21

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A number of years ago we celebrated the 175th anniversary of our church. It was a special occasion. It took place over an extended period of time and included a lot of different events and activities. One of them was a worship service in which former pastors participated. Afterwards a photograph was taken on the front steps of the church. Many of those ministers were wearing stoles, brightly colored bands of cloth worn around their necks and stretching down on either side of their robes. Why do ministers, especially those in the more traditional Christian denominations, wear this kind of regalia when they lead in worship? Have you ever thought about that? I did and for that reason decided to do a little research. The wearing of stoles has a lengthy history dating back hundreds of years. Their exact origin is unknown, perhaps all the way back to the first centuries of Christianity. What they represent, however, is easier to discern. They indicate that an individual has been set aside for a special purpose. They have been called to serve the Lord, ministering in His name and authority.

Such was also the case thousands of years ago when Elijah anointed Elisha with the mantle of prophetic authority. Elijah took it from around his own shoulders and placed it upon the shoulders of Elisha. Its appearance was probably far different from the attractive stoles that ministers wear today. Instead, it may have been a cloak made from the hairy hide of a sheep or a goat. In fact, it may have had such a distinctive appearance that everyone who saw it immediately recognized that the person who wore it was a prophet, a spokesman for God. That was certainly the case with regards to Elisha and those within his family who celebrated this event. Let's examine the passage of Scripture that was read this morning as well as the things that lead up to it.

Elisha, whose name means "God is salvation," was a member of a prosperous farming family. In fact, he was the overseer or manager of twelve yoke of oxen, 24 animals who were plowing the fields of his father. This was no small farming operation. One day while he was plowing with one of those twelve pairs of oxen, a guest arrived. He was no ordinary guest. He was Elijah the prophet, a man whose presence generated both awe and fear among those whom he met. He was the one who at the Lord's command had brought a three-year drought upon the land and he was also the one who had led a spiritual revival on the slopes of Mount Carmel. Dressed in an outfit that clearly marked him as a prophet, everyone knew that he possessed awesome spiritual authority and power. The question, therefore, arose as to why he had chosen to show up at this farm. It didn't take long to find out. Taking off his prophetic mantle or robe, his designation as a prophet of God, Elijah placed it upon the shoulders of Elisha.

Everyone knew what that meant. Elijah had chosen Elisha to be the next prophet of Israel. Elijah was both old and tired. He had served the Lord for many years. During his sojourn at the mountain of God, when he fled from the wrath of Jezebel, God had instructed him to choose a successor and the man whom God had chosen was Elisha.

Having placed the prophetic mantle upon the shoulders of Elisha, Elijah turned as if he was preparing to leave. Elisha knew he was facing a life changing decision. He could stay and continue to work on his father's farm, perhaps inheriting it in the future, or he could become a student, an apprentice, of the renowned prophet Elijah. The answer was quick in coming. Elisha stepped aside from plowing. Then he ran after Elijah and told him, "Let me say goodbye to my family and then I will come and follow after you." Elijah responded by stating, "What have I done to you," meaning are you sure you know what you are deciding to do?

Elisha was sure. He slaughtered the two oxen with whom he had been plowing, used the wood of the ox yoke to build a fire to cook the meat, and invited his family and co-workers to a going-away party. Afterwards, he left behind everything that he had known. He said goodbye to his family and any future plans he might have had. He became the companion of Elijah, serving as his attendant. From that point on he would be known as a son of a prophet, a person who had given up everything to serve the Lord. It was a role which he would assume in the future when Elijah was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot. When that time arrived, he would acquire the spiritual authority and power which his predecessor had possessed. In fact, just before Elijah was carried away, Elisha asked for and received a double portion of his mentor's spirit, the ability to perform signs and wonders and fearlessly proclaim the "Word of the Lord."

Now what does this account from the pages of the Old Testament have to say to us this morning as we welcome Ben Banner and his family into the life of our church family? There are several things that I would call to your attention. First, God has blessed this church for a long, long time. All anyone has to do is read the history of our church to see God's hand at work in its life and ministry. Beginning as a mission in the 1760's, this church has enjoyed periods of both growth and decline. In 1844 it moved into its new sanctuary, the building in which we are seated this morning. The church grew in membership until the Civil War when it reached a low point of just 39 members in 1865. Thankfully, better times lay ahead and the church became a focal point in the life of the town of Bedford. One of the most significant events in its history took place during the Second World War. Dr. John Gray, the longest serving and perhaps the church's most beloved pastor, presided over the town's tragic loss of life when so many of the Bedford Boys were among those killed on Omaha Beach in Normandy, France on June 6th, 1944. As news arrived of what had transpired on that day, the doors of the church were continually open as a place for the Bedford community to meet, grieve and pray. Growth followed during the late 1940's and 50's with the church

at one point having a membership of just over 400. However, like so many churches in America, the last half of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first century have not been kind to church membership, especially in congregations associated with the more traditional Christian denominations.

This brings us to a second observation. Over the years God has sent a variety of pastors to serve this congregation. Some stayed only for a short while and others served for many years. Our previous pastor, John Salley, was our pastor for sixteen years. His tenure was the second longest. Some of our church's pastors came from Virginia and neighboring states. One came from as far away as Fort Lauderdale, Florida. They ministered to the congregation in a variety of different ways helping the congregation to face the various challenges confronting the church. Each of these pastors was skillful and dedicated in different ways. Some were inspiring preachers. Others were gifted administrators. Some were quite young when they arrived, fresh out of seminary. Others were older, having served in other Presbyterian churches before coming to Bedford. Some had a more pronounced influence upon the life of the church than others. But without exception, each of them was a man of God, who was called by God just like Elisha, to minister to the needs of the household of the Lord in Bedford. Some, like Wilson Rowe, were noted for their inspiring and thought-provoking sermons. Others were known for their devotion to the principles and doctrines of Presbyterianism, like John Shepperson who served in the 1800's. Some, like our most recent pastor, John Salley, championed a way of life built upon the Scriptures. Each of these men were like Old Testament prophets, called by God to deliver His message to His people.

Finally, there is a third observation that I want to share with you. There comes a time when the mantle of leadership is transferred from the shoulders of one of God's servants to the shoulders of the one who will follow after him. That is what transpired when Elijah anointed Elisha and that is what is taking place in the life of our church today. Of course, there will be a time of transition just like there was in the days of Elijah and Elisha. There was still work for the aged Elijah to do, like confronting king Ahab because he stole a neighbor's vineyard, even plotting behind the scenes to have the man killed. For the most part, however, this was a time of apprenticeship, teaching the younger Elisha what would be expected of him as a spokesman for God. For the most part, this does not apply to our new pastor. He arrives having served two churches in California. Nevertheless, there will be times when he will need a helping hand from all of us as he assumes the duties and responsibilities of being our pastor.

There is one more observation that is crucially important. After Elijah placed the mantle of leadership on the shoulders of Elisha, how did everyone respond? They had a party. They enjoyed a time of fellowship, celebrating with Elisha the new calling which he had received from God. Today, we need to follow their example. For that reason, we are going to have a fellowship potluck dinner in the fellowship

hall after the service this morning. It will be a time for us to celebrate the arrival of our new pastor. It will also be a time to give thanks for our entire pastoral staff and for all of those who work so diligently to guide and direct the work of God's kingdom in this church. In the past we have called this fellowship dinner and day "Aloha Sunday." It is my understanding that "aloha" can have a multitude of meanings including not only "hello," but gratitude, kindness and peace, among a number of other possibilities as well. So let this day be our "aloha" Sunday for Ben and Tiffany and their family as well as "thank you" to Bill and Deanna, and Lana as well as for all of those who have so faithfully served the Lord in the past and who will continue to faithfully serve Him in the future right here at Bedford Presbyterian Church.