

## *A Double Portion*

### **II Kings 2:6-14**

Wayne Eberly

June 26, 2016

In one of the most dramatic moments of the Old Testament, a chariot of fire and horses of fire appear and they take the prophet Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elijah has been a mentor to Elisha, and as Elisha watches Elijah ascend in that chariot of fire, he cries out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel.” And then Elijah is gone. Elisha sees him no more. What he does see is the cloak that belonged to Elijah lying on the ground. Once Elijah had used that very cloak to call Elisha to follow him and to prepare take Elijah’s place as the prophet of Israel. Elisha had followed him now for quite some time.

Now Elijah is gone, taken to heaven by a chariot of fire. Left behind on the ground is the cloak, or as it is often called, the mantle. The mantle is lying there on the ground. Compared to the moment when Elijah ascended to heaven in a chariot of fire, what Elisha does next might seem small and insignificant. But I believe what Elisha does is every bit as dramatic and powerful and significant as that chariot of fire. Elisha picks up the mantle from the prophet Elijah. He takes up the mantle. He carries the mantle. It is a rare day when a chariot of fire appears and carries a servant of God to heaven. I guess it is best to thank God for such awesome events as the chariot of fire. But this other event, the one that is seemingly less significant, and definitely less spectacular, now that is something that might have happened in our lives, something that might have happened in our life as a church. That might be something God is doing right now in our very midst. There might be a mantle lying on the ground just waiting, just waiting for a servant of the Lord to pick it up, to wrap the mantle around their shoulders, and to carry the mantle forward in ministry and service.

Passing the mantle can be as clear cut and well defined as Elisha picking up the cloak of Elijah, and it can also be a long and drawn out process spanning many years and even many relationships. The ending of school is one form of passing the mantle. Even though finishing a year in school is just one small step, for those who teach it can be a profound experience of passing the mantle. A story I like a lot begins

with these words: “Saying goodbye to children in the final days of school is hard for teachers everywhere.” With that Jonathan Kozol describes a teacher in P.S. 30 in the south Bronx of New York City and her interactions with her children on the last day of school. Over the course of the year a special bond has been built, and by the end of the year, “They’re all your children now and you don’t usually like to let them go.”

I get a big lump in my throat every time I read through the final day of school that Miss Frances Dukes has with her flock of second grade children. “She is a strict and loving teacher with good old-fashioned tenderness, and that last day of school is filled with rituals that many of us remember from our own best days in public schools.” It is a day when things are a little more relaxed, but Miss Dukes still maintains structure, and still keeps instructing. When Tabitha reads a story about the boy who cried wolf, Miss Dukes praises her for her progress. Although she miss pronounces “woof”, she receives profuse praise. Miss Dukes relates how Tabitha couldn’t understand a single word in the fall, but through hard work and lots of tutoring from Miss Dukes, she is reading well.

The day is filled with final instructions. This is the last shot for Miss Dukes. She says, “I want the boys here to remember this: When we come into the world our mother cares for us. But when our mother is very old and she is getting ready to depart the world we have to care for her. So I want every boy here to grow up into a good strong grown-up man, so you will always be there for your mother.” Then she adds, “Don’t ever miss an opportunity to tell your mother that you love her.”

The class celebrates birthdays. Elio has turned nine. He has a brand-new tennis racquet on his desk, a present from another teacher. Miss Dukes holds it up and she asks Elio, “Did you know that I play tennis too?”

“You do?” he says.

“I do!”

The idea of their teacher playing tennis seems surprising to the children. She's such a dignified lady that it's hard to picture her in shorts and jersey running back and forth across a court chasing a ball. She then surprises the kids by telling them she also likes to rollerblade. The children treat this like a scandalous confession.

A little after two o'clock, a group of girls who have just graduated from the fifth grade come to tell Miss Dukes goodbye. Next year they will be in middle school, but they make a point of seeing Miss Dukes before they go.

Two-fifteen in the second grade classroom, and Elio is in his chair, and Tabitha in hers. Now Miss Dukes begins a very tender speech. "This year we had 29 children in our class, and I think that everybody knows that was too many. Next year, I'm afraid you may have even more...so you need to respect your teacher, and each other, and be good in every way, and if you are, if you're polite, you'll save your teacher's voice—because you know how many troubles I had with my throat this year...

"I'd like to see some of you children go to college and work hard so you can study to be teachers. So all of the mistakes your teachers made when you were growing up, you can be sure you'll never make. So you can be much better teachers to your students than I was to you.

"And this summer, above all, children, please be safe! And never talk to strangers who approach you in the street. And, every night, please put a book beneath your pillow.

"And be good to your mothers. And listen to your mothers. And be respectful to your mothers. And those of you who will be going to your grandma's for the summer, please don't let her give you too much candy.

“All right then...”

“Goodbye, Miss Dukes!”

“Goodbye, children.”

All right then...,” she says again.

“Goodbye!”

“Goodbye!”

“All right then...,” the teacher says, “I love you.”<sup>1</sup>

How do you let go of children you love? How do you send them off into the world? How do you prepare them for the dangers, the opportunities, the hazards, and the hopes? Miss Dukes kept on instructing and advising those kids right up to the last minute. And then she almost couldn't bring herself to say, “Goodbye.” All right then...It is a scary thing to pass the mantle. There is the chance the ones who are given the mantle will stumble and fall, and if you love them like Miss Dukes loves her children, that is a fearful thought.

When Elisha picks up the mantle from Elijah it is just about as perfect a transition as you could imagine. The signs that this was a successful transition are immediate and impressive. Right before that chariot of fire lifted him from the earth, the prophet Elijah took his cloak, his mantle, rolled it up and struck the water of the Jordan River. The water divided to the right and the left and Elijah and Elisha walked through on dry ground. Now Elisha picks up the mantle and he strikes the water with the mantle. The water divided to the right and to the left so that he could cross over on dry ground. The mantle has been passed, and the parting of the water is a clear marker of the successful transition.

It is interesting that both Elijah and Elisha part waters and walk on dry ground. That is obviously something that causes us to remember another time waters parted and people walked through on dry ground. Moses led the people through the Red Sea and his protégé, his successor Joshua led the people across the Jordan on dry ground. That was another successful transition, from Moses to Joshua. But in the history of Israel there were many times the mantle wasn't passed, or the mantle was not picked up and carried on.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *Ordinary Resurrections*, 307-313.

Elijah and Elisha were living in a time when the transitions and passing of the mantle had been disastrous. Over and over again leaders and kings and even prophets had arisen who were unfaithful. The most recent transition for Israel was the death of Ahab, who was one of the sorriest and most evil kings ever to rule God's people. He passed the mantle to his son Ahaziah, and unfortunately it was a perfect transition, a perfectly bad transition. The first thing we find Ahaziah doing is sending his messengers to consult with Baal-Zebub, the wicked god of Ekron. Israel is turning to false gods for advice and counsel. And the practices of Israel during these days were an abomination as their idolatry led to injustice and inequality. Things were so bad Elijah had despaired of his life, had complained to God and even pleaded with God to end his suffering, to take his life. He said to God, "I have had enough." These were terrible days. It turns out one of the ways God props up Elijah and lifts his spirits is by telling him to call Elisha to follow him and to prepare him to be his successor. In the midst of an extremely trying time, in the midst of a dark and difficult spiritual battle, one of the ways God strengthens the spirit of Elijah is to say the mantle will be passed on, and that mantle will be picked up and carried on. There will be a future. There will be hope.

Watching the way this congregation here at Dunn's Corners values the children and youth gives me great joy, because whether we know it or not we are making a serious and sustained effort to pass the mantle of faith. It happens in countless interactions in Sunday school classes and youth fellowship and on trips and activities. It happens in homes as parents and loved ones invest in the children and youth. It happens when roles of leadership are extended to the youth and they answer the call, stepping up to serve. It happens when there is a youth Sunday and powerful testimonies are given about a faith that is developing and growing and being strengthened and challenged. It happens when the youth come forward with a big idea of hosting youth rallies at church and in schools that will make a statement that life is precious and that differences are to be accepted and love is for all. It happens when youth rally together to Speak Out to Reach Out. It happens when Vacation Bible School is coming up and our youth take a leadership role,

The church I grew up in was just about the same size as Dunn's Corners in a town that was remarkably similar, down to the Amtrak station and a park next to the library. One time when I was a senior in high school the church had a youth Sunday. Our youth pastor asked me to give the message. My worst experience in high school was in a speech class, where I stood up, got tongue tied, embarrassed myself horribly, and swore I would never get up and speak in front of a group again. Somehow my youth pastor convinced me to get up that Youth Sunday. They hooked me up with a lapel microphone. This was a long time ago, and so even though it was a lapel microphone, it was not wireless. There was a wire about three feet long running from the microphone to the pulpit. I rushed through my message, preaching my ten minute sermon in about three minutes. By the grace of God I finished my sermon and I couldn't leave that pulpit fast enough. As I literally sprinted away from the pulpit, I forgot about my lapel mike. I made my escape fine for three feet, but then I ran out of cord and it jerked me back, causing me to trip and almost fall. At that point the congregation joined me in a good laugh, and they even gave me a rousing round of applause. It seems they were as relieved as I that I had made it through my sermon. A strange thing happened after the service. People came up, people I had known all my life. They affirmed me. They encouraged me. They made me feel like maybe I had something to offer. That meant more to me than those people could ever have known. I was a place in my life when I needed to have something to offer. I was in a downward spiral, and their encouragement, in a way I couldn't identify until many years later, gave me the courage to pick up the mantle and listen for God's call.

Something of great interest to me in the Elijah and Elisha story is that we get the impression Elisha might not have been a youth when he picked up the mantle. When Elijah throws his cloak on him in I Kings 19, Elisha is already old enough to be out plowing the field with twelve yoke of oxen. It seems the mantle can be extended to us at any time in our lives, as children, as youth, as adults. Some of the most meaningful mentoring relationships are with adults, often one with a little more experience in life or in ministry who ends up having a lot to share with us. I have benefited from that type of mentoring as a young pastor, as a young parent, as an adult having to deal with aging parents, as a man in the middle of life experiencing the emptiness that can accompany being an empty nester.

Along with ones who end up being a mentor at all of these various stages of life, this story also encourages us and challenges us to never stop asking and seeking and being open to a mantle that needs to be picked up, a ministry where maybe you or I are exactly the right person to step in and serve the Lord with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength. You have something to offer. Big or small, in the spotlight and limelight or behind the scenes and hidden, you have something to offer. And believe me, there are needs, in this church, in this community, in this world, there are needs. A cloak is lying on the ground. Many, many cloaks are lying on the ground, mantles just waiting to be picked up. I hope we will always be a church that understands how important it is to mentor and shepherd and encourage and challenge and guide and train and equip one another, a church that is always conscious of the need to pass on the mantle. And I hope we will always be a church where people are willing to reach down and pick up the mantle, to step up, to fill in, as we heard a few weeks ago on youth Sunday, to stand in the gap.

My sisters are coming to visit this summer. My younger sister Gail is coming in July. Gail is a math teacher. My dad was a math teacher. It turns out my older brother Danny and my younger sister Gail are high school math teachers. Both she and my brother took up the mantle from my dad. My older sister Anne is coming in early August. Anne is a nurse. My mother was a nurse. It turns out my mom was teaching the adult school class for Licensed Vocational Nurses when my sister Anne decided to be a Licensed Vocational Nurse. The pictures from that graduation are priceless, my mom in her nurses uniform, a bold, white uniform and cap that she wore with pride her whole life, pinning my sister on that graduation day, passing the mantle.

Sometimes the passing of the mantle can be the most precious thing. It can be as tender as Miss Dukes and her second grade class when she can't quite say goodbye to her beloved children. "All right then...all right then..." The passing of the mantle from my mom to my sister Anne was one of those precious moments. In retirement my mom organized a hospice ministry for our county. She was the hospice nurse, gently caring for people in their last hours. In April of 2012 my mom had long

since retired, and unfortunately she suffered from memory loss. She had a stroke and she who had cared for so many went under hospice care. There was one special nurse during that time. My sister Anne would come and take care of my mom. My mom, who had given so much to so many others, received that same gentle love and care in her last days, because my sister had taken up her mantle.

Once you take up the mantle, it seems God keeps using you again and again to share his love. We received a message from my sister Anne that her best friend Sonja had gone into hospice care. This was June 3<sup>rd</sup>, just a few weeks ago. Anne said, "I will be assisting in her care." This past Monday we received a note from Anne. Sonja had passed away. Anne had been by her side as she slowly slipped away. The mantle had been passed on. She picked it up. She saw the need. She felt the call. She served the Lord.

For some it is in a pulpit. For others it is in a classroom. Some will find the mantle in a home caring for a loved one. There are those who have heard of the plight of the homeless, the hungry, the refugee, the poor, and they realized that was their mantle, that was their call. There are those who were asked to serve as an officer in the church, and the Lord said this is your mantle. Take it up. In any of these ways and in all of these ways there is a cloak lying on the ground. There is a cloak waiting to be picked up. There is a call waiting to be answered. There is a role waiting to be filled. There is a ministry waiting to come to life. When we hear that call, when we find that ministry, when we sense the tug and pull of the Holy Spirit, may we act with the same boldness, the same courage, the same conviction as that prophet of old, the one named Elisha. When we see the mantle lying on the ground, may we pick it up and carry it forward with faithfulness and devotion.