

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

PASSING THE MANTLE

1 Kings 19:15-16, [17-18], 19-21

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8)

Analysis by Chris Repp

15Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.16Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. [17Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. 18Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.]"

19So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. 20He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" 21He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

Author's note: I have difficulty making sense of this pericope without the verses omitted in the Revised Common Lectionary.

DIAGNOSIS: "My God is the LORD" (Elijah)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Suffering

This story comes at a pivotal point in the account of Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings. It begins in the midst of great suffering. The united kingdom of Israel has been torn asunder, north from south. Drought and famine have plagued the northern kingdom and the prophets of the LORD (YHWH) have been persecuted and killed. One prophet, Elijah, has been instrumental in vanquishing the prophets of Baal, but this has provoked the Queen, the patron of the Baal worshipers, to retaliate, swearing to have Elijah killed. Elijah is driven to despair.

It's tempting to make comparisons to suffering, division, and injustice in our own time and place. How are things where you live? Are your sick cared for? Your homeless housed? Are your people united? Your local and national government free of corruption? Are prophets heard and honored? Do workers receive a living wage?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Faithlessness

All of 1 and 2 Kings is about the faithlessness of God's people, especially those appointed to rule over them. This is the cause of the suffering. In the time of Elijah and Elisha the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses, and Joshua, and David has fallen out of favor. God's chosen, liberated, and restored people have forgotten God's saving grace and have turned instead to the local gods. God's intent in calling Abraham and making of him a great nation was to bless all nations through him (Genesis 12:3). That intent seems lost on the people, who are interested only in their own blessings, from wherever they can get them.

And how is it with your people? For surely God's intent for Israel has implications for your nation too. Does it see the blessings that have created and sustained it as something to be shared with others? Or does it see them as its own birthright, to be hoarded and protected? And how are you doing with your own, personal blessings?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Unavoidable Death
God's response, though seemingly slow in coming, is decisive. Death is the consequence. The unfaithful deserve nothing else. ("I am the LORD," says God repeatedly when executing judgment [Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Ezekiel, passim.]) There is no escape.

PROGNOSIS: "My God Saves" (Elisha)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Unexpected Life
Despite Elijah's protest that he alone is left (1 Kings 19:11), God has preserved a more numerous faithful remnant. God has a plan for saving them and ending their oppression.

Yet by an even stricter criterion, none are righteous (Ps. 14), "all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God" (Romans 3:23). It is left to God alone to be the faithful remnant of one, to come among us as one of us, the man Jehoshua ("The LORD [the name synonymous with judgment] saves," rendered "Jesus" in Greek). This is God's ultimate plan. But instead of executing judgment on the unfaithful (i.e. all people!), our God saves us by taking that judgment upon himself and becoming the executed.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Faithfulness
Elisha is one of the faithful. When Elijah passes the mantle to him his response is immediate. He will take the mantle. He will follow.

And how is it with your people? The nation of the baptized, I mean, those called out of death into life by the God who saves? Is not their mantle the gift of the Holy Spirit, called down upon them in baptism—the Spirit who creates faith in those who hear the gospel, who evokes trust in the promise of "the LORD saves"?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Blessing

Elisha's faithfulness has consequences for his relationship with others. At great personal sacrifice he gives up all that he has—his livelihood, we call it—and blesses his people with a great feast.

And you, and your people? (You knew I was going to ask.) Does not our trust in the promise move us to self-sacrifice on behalf of the suffering? Is not the life for which we have been saved for others as well? Is not the feast we share each week a feast for all? Are we not, like Abraham and Sarah, blessed to be a blessing for all people?