

## **Carried Away**

2 Kings 2:1-14, Luke 9:51-62

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Church of the New Covenant

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In this vivid passage from 2 Kings, it is easy to identify with the distress Elisha feels. He has been an apprentice to the great prophet Elijah for some time. He has traveled with him, received instruction from him, and witnessed his bold confrontations with the secular powers. And, now that Elijah is preparing to leave, the job will pass on to him.

There is an interesting parallel between the background story of Elisha (1 K 19:19ff) and the rebuke by Jesus to “anyone who puts a hand to the plow and looks back.” Do you remember the night an exhausted and despairing Elijah stood on Mt Horeb and experienced the closeness of God? God, whose voice was not in the tornado or the earthquake or the fire, but in the sheer silence that followed? Immediately after that, Elijah resumed his travels, and then he came upon “Elisha, son of Shaphat, who was plowing a field” with an enormous team of oxen.

Elijah ran past him and threw his mantle – the symbol of his office as prophet – upon him. “Wait! Wait a minute!” called Elisha. “Let me first kiss my father and my mother. Then I will follow you!” Elijah’s response is a bit different from Jesus’: “Go right ahead, because I have asked a very difficult thing of you.”

All of this is to say that Elisha is acutely aware that he is to be Elijah’s successor as God’s prophet, God’s spokesperson within Israel. He has been in training for some time, but when his moment comes, he again cries, “Wait! Wait a minute!” And then, “Don’t go yet!!”

How many of us have had that feeling? The feeling what we might not be quite ready? Did you have an uneasy feeling in your stomach on graduation day? (Hopefully it had something to do with the future and not with the activities of the past evening.) Have you ever had a lump in your throat when you were about to begin a new job, or on the first day of school, or at the door of the church on your wedding day?

Elisha doesn't feel quite ready for what he knows is going to be a daunting task. He has been chosen by God to be the next voice that will hold the people of Israel to the standards of God's faithfulness and God's justice.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" he cries. Then, finally, when he realizes he cannot hold onto Elijah any longer, he makes this desperate but understandable request: "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." It takes a lot of Spirit to speak out on God's behalf to a culture that doesn't really want to hear what God has to say. Elisha wants as much Spirit as he can get. He wants a double shot.

As Christians, we are the heirs – whether or not we ever feel ready – of the prophetic call of Elijah and Elisha. This church is constituted by the call of Christ and empowered by the force of the Holy Spirit. We are the ones entrusted with the call to justice as God has established it. We are the ones whom God requires "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God." We Christians are the prophetic community of this day, who are called to study, proclaim and live the Gospel, and to shine its light upon the culture around us.

As Americans, we are approaching the 231<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the founding of our nation. We should recall with pride the courage our founders displayed when they staked a claim for freedom and paid for it with their blood. We should recall with honor the vision our founders exhibited when they hammered out a constitution that would make the United States a nation of laws and not of rulers who happen to have power. And we should remember with deepest conviction that we have a government of the people, by the people and for the people, and not a government of the people by the powerful. Just as we are required by our citizenship to be loyal and responsible to our country, so also our President, our Congress and our Supreme Court, by their office, are required to be fair and accountable to us.

When our Vice President, claiming he is "not an entity within the executive branch," refuses to abide by the orders of his President, when he steers the Administration to ignore the Geneva Conventions in the interment and interrogation of prisoners, and disregard the civil rights of American citizens by monitoring their phone calls, we need to shine the light of the Gospel on that and ask, *Is this just?*

When Americans, forgetting they themselves are immigrants, refuse to consider the humanity of hard-working people who make important contributions to our economy and our society, and adopt a “throw the bums out” attitude, we need to shine the light of the Gospel on that and ask, *Is this just?*

These are difficult questions, and it is very uncomfortable to ask them.

As the Church of the New Covenant, we come together to hear the Word of God and to do our best to understand the Word of God, to live by the Word of God and to share the Word of God with our neighbors. We are a community – you and me – us – and though I am the one officially designated as “preacher”, all of us are called upon to read, consider, and try to interpret what God’s Word is saying to us in this place in these times. Though I am one whose commission it is to stand up among you to do that, I make no claim to have all the answers. I make no claim to be a singular channel of the Holy Spirit or of any form of divine wisdom. My call, though different in ecclesial function, is the same as your call: to listen together for God’s Word to us and to do our best to *live it* in this place and in these times. In order for any one of us to do this, we must, as members of this community of faith, stay in constant prayer and conversation about it.

As a community we are a lot like the quilts that some of you make from time to time. The making of the quilt involves many skilled hands, many creative pairs of eyes, many voices in conversation around it, many generous hearts sewing every stitch. The making of a quilt is itself an act of community, and the result a symbol of it. We have different experiences. We are of different ages and educational backgrounds. We come from different cultural heritages. And we certainly have different opinions about things. That is what makes us such a beautiful patchwork, sewn together in our marvelous variety by the love of Jesus Christ.

Because of this, it is my deepest desire that we make the best possible effort to keep our conversations open. Avoiding discomfort by not talking about difficult things only deepens the discomfort, and it tears the seams of our fabric of community.

If you have a bone to pick with me, pick it with me. As we work over that old bone, like a couple of old lions on the edge of the savannah, we might feel pretty uncomfortable for a little while – but – we each might find some pretty good morsels on that bone. We might find also that the grace of God is bigger than both of us, and that where there once was a growing fissure, a new bond can form.

We are truly blessed to be members of this fellowship called Church of the New Covenant. We have learned from the very encouraging results of our second Natural Church Development survey that we are a can-do congregation. We have done something that no other congregation has ever done: we have improved in every area! Among them are these: We are moving forward in the cultivation of our spirituality. We are deepening our experience of God in worship – and having more fun! We are beginning to engage in actual evangelism. And, we are learning more and more about the gifts for ministry God has given each of us and how to put them to work in our life together and our service in God's world.

We are moving forward. We have a developing opportunity right now, right here, to form new partnerships in ministry, to invite new friends into the meaning of our worship together, and to grow into a new future together.

Elijah was carried away by fiery chariots in a tornado. Elisha was carried away also; that is, he was carried forward by the power of the Holy Spirit to declare God's justice and God's love to a people often reluctant to hear. Therefore let us as the Church of the New Covenant be carried away by that same Holy Spirit to proclaim God's justice and God's love right now, right here.