

Transitions

2 Kings 2:1-12

This is one of those passages that has its roots deep in the mythology of ancient Israel. It is at least a little bit familiar to us because this is where the film *Chariots of Fire* gets its name, and this is where we find the origin of the expression, "passing on the mantle of leadership." The story also gives us one of the earliest uses of the term "Father" as a title for a religious leader.

The story is one of transition. Elijah, who has been the key prophetic voice for Israel and, even today, is thought of as the prophet par excellence and of a stature like Moses, is going. Elisha is coming, and the narrator is taking great pains to show that he is a worthy successor.

Elijah and Elisha are walking along the road traveling from Gilgal to Bethel, that is, away from the Jordan River. There they meet up with a "company of prophets" who come out to meet them and who, in an aside to Elisha, ask him, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?" Elisha responds that he does and adds that they should just keep quiet about it.

Here Elijah offers his young protege an opportunity to part ways: "Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho". But Elisha will have none of it, so they reverse course and journey to Jericho where they are again met by another "company of prophets" who again pull Elisha aside and ask the same question that had been posed at Bethel. Elisha's response is equally irritable, equivalent to, "Yeah, I know; just shut up about it!"

Now Elijah offers Elisha one more opportunity to back off: "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan" Again, Elisha will have none of it, so the two press on.

Now they arrive at the river. It seems that everyone knew what was about to take place so even fifty or so of the local clergy are tagging along at a distance, acting in this story for all the world like the chorus of an opera. If anyone up to this point was still wondering about Elijah's place in the pantheon of Israel's heroes, it is clarified once and for all as he rolls up his cloak and strikes the waters. They part, of course, just as they did for Moses at the Sea of Reeds, allowing the prophetic pair to cross on dry ground.

Now it is just the two of them and Elijah makes an incredible offer to Elisha: "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?".

Without batting an eye, Elisha responds, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit", the normal request of an eldest son in that day. Elijah acknowledges that, under the circumstances, this is a difficult request to grant but stipulates the conditions under which it is indeed possible: Elisha must see when Elijah's departure takes place. The text then records that the two of them continue their way walking and talking until "... suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind". He does not die; he is just whisked away.

Elisha is devastated and cries, "Father, father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!". When the prophet is gone from sight, he rips his clothes into two pieces, the traditional symbolic act of inconsolable grief. No surprise, here. It is a time of transition, and times of transition in our lives can be painful.

Now we reach the story's conclusion. Elisha bends down and picks up his master's discarded cloak - the "mantle of leadership" is passed on. Elisha strikes the waters of the Jordan himself and asks, "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?". Bingo, the waters part again, and now both Elisha and the chorus of prophets watching from the west bank know full well where the God of Elijah is: The Lord is with Elisha as the Lord had been with Elijah. And this is the point of the passage: The people of God are not abandoned. As one prophet passes on, another is immediately raised. Transitions may be difficult, but the work of God will go on.

That has always been the case in the church. One leader goes, another is raised up. The transition may be difficult, but it is bearable. Change, as we all know, is inevitable. As one commentator notes, Literature has always helped

the human race rehearse change and come to terms with it, perhaps even find value in it ... Biblical literature goes even further, insisting that change is meaningful and bearable because God is the author of change. God's whirlwind blows away every love, every security, every safety. The same changeless God pushes ceaseless change on the world. Yet God's commission for ministry transcends change. Elisha picks up the mantle of prophetic office and turns the word of God loose on yet another generation.

How will a new generation hear the word? Every indication is that it will not be in just the same way that previous generations had heard. There is new music, new worship styles, new technology that has come into play. There are new understandings of what God is calling people to be and do. The transitions are not always comfortable, but they surely are inevitable.

It is intriguing that we encounter this story at precisely this moment in America's history. Most would agree that we, as a nation, are in a period of transition. The polls say that almost 80% of Americans are dissatisfied with the direction our country is going and a change is needed. That dissatisfaction might mean one thing to one person and something entirely different to another, but the dissatisfaction is real, nonetheless.

What kind of change is in the offing? The end of war and the return home of troops? A health care system that takes care of everyone and not just the very rich and very poor while leaving the vast middle at risk? Changes in the tax structure that more fairly reflect an individual's and an industry's ability to pay. Immigration reform that neither rewards bad behavior nor penalizes someone's legitimate aspirations for a better life. More attention paid to issues of poverty, not just the millions of our own people considered by the government as living below the poverty line, but the one billion people in the world who eke by on less than \$1 per day. What kind of changes will we see?

Transition time - change - in the church, in society, and everywhere. My friend, Carlos Wilton, notes:

Living through life's transitional times is never easy. Feelings of grief for that which is lost, or about to be lost, can seem overwhelming. Sometimes there is a feeling of being stuck between the has-been and the not-yet - and that experience of "stuckness" seems to go on and on ... Whenever we must say good-bye to the old and embrace the new - however fearsome and unfamiliar the new may seem - there may appear for a time to be no way forward. Yet faith reveals to us that there is such a way....

The story of the seamless transition from Elijah to Elisha testifies to that. Amen.