

Sermon

Feb. 11, 2018

Based on 2 Kings 2:1-12

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Have you ever had to say good bye to a mentor? Maybe you were moving away. Or your mentor was dying. I can't say I have ever had that experience. But I'm confident the older I get the more likely that time will come when I will have the chance to say good bye to a mentor before they draw their last breath. I can imagine that saying good bye to a mentor, one who has had a major influence on your life, is hard to do but also very sacred and powerful.

The Ramones were an iconic punk rock band from the 1970s. Their music and the attitude that came with it inspired a lot of kids to pick up a guitar or some drum sticks and make their own music. All you needed was three chords and a lot of teenage angst. One of those bands that were inspired by the Ramones was U2. They looked to the Ramones as one of the bands that inspired them to make their own music. Several years ago, Joey Ramone was in the hospital dying of cancer. The Edge and Bono went to see him, one last time. They played for him a song that was on their most recent album called "In a Little While." They got Joey's approval. In fact, they were told that this was perhaps the last song Joey Ramone heard before he passed away. How cool that must have been to have that moment to say good bye to someone you idolized as a kid, someone who inspired you in such a deep way, and to have that person express appreciation for you and your work.

I have found that the older you get, the more you start thinking about the next generation. You wonder about, maybe sometimes worry about, or sometimes are inspired about, the generation following you who will continue the work, continue the tradition, continue our nation, continue the church. None of us will be here forever. One of these days, each of us will have to lay it down, make room for the next generation to step up and carry on.

The Olympics are a great reminder of this. These athletes are so young! A big deal is made about this long jump skier who is the oldest Olympian this year at the staggering, ancient age of 45! They have athletes this year at the Olympics that were born in the year 2000. It is very inspiring to see these young people compete, so full of energy, of emotion and passion. The Olympics inspire such hope for a better future for the world, even as the weight of the world's brokenness hangs like a cloud. It's exciting to see a new generation of Olympians, even as we anticipate the Olympian movement continuing into the future as even younger kids dream about the opportunity to go for the gold.

So, yes, the time will come for each of us, a time of transition, when the mentor must make room for the mentee to take their place, to have their moment on the stage. And it is important that those transitions happen well.

The story of Elijah and Elisha that we heard this morning is about making that transition. Elijah the mentor is about to be carried up to heaven on that fiery chariot. Elisha the mentee will take his place, carrying on the prophetic work so that God can continue to speak to the people. Let's take a look at this fascinating story and see what can be found about making this transition from one generation to the next.

The first thing to notice is how Elijah keeps trying to ditch Elisha. "You stay here, God is calling me on to Bethel...you stay here, God is calling me on to Jericho...you stay here, God is calling me on to the Jordan." Time and again, Elijah tells his student, his disciple, his mentee, to leave him and let him go. But time and time again, Elisha says, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." Elisha refuses his teacher, his master, his mentor. He will not leave his side. We don't know why Elijah tries to shake Elisha off. Elijah knew that the Lord would be taking him soon. Maybe he was worried that if Elisha saw God take him that Elisha may get harmed? After all, no one can see the Lord and live. Or maybe Elijah did not think that Elisha was supposed to keep following him. God was coming to take Elijah, not both of them. Or maybe it was some kind of test, that Elijah was testing Elisha to see how faithful he would be to Elijah as he prepares to leave this world. What good is it to hang with Elijah any more now that his

work is finished, he is all spent, washed out, retiring from prophecy? We are left having to ponder what exactly was in Elijah's mind. But we do know that Elisha had no intention of leaving Elijah's side. He would stick with him to the end.

I wonder. If you have a mentor, do you stay in relationship with that mentor or have you moved on? Perhaps that mentor was important to you for a season, while you were learning the ropes of your career, or you were going through a detour or were navigating a setback or a difficult problem, you have made it through the trouble with your mentor's guidance, but then you have just moved on and lost touch with that mentor of yours. I believe people come into our lives for a season, that God places these people in our lives to help us through or to lift us up to the next stage of our life's journey. But once you get through that stage, is it o.k. to leave your mentor behind? I wonder if that might be a mistake. Sure, your relationship with your mentor may change. You don't need that mentor's guidance like you used to. But does it hurt to check in now and then? Would it not be a blessing for your mentor to get updates on how things are going, that they may see how the time they invested in you has helped make you who you are today?

The second thing to notice is the question Elijah asks Elisha when they get to the other side of the Jordan. "What may I do for you before I am taken from you?" The moment has come. Elijah's departing is imminent. Their time together is drawing to a close. Elisha has stuck with Elijah all the way to the end. So if there is anything Elijah can do for Elisha, this is his last shot. Elisha is ready to answer the question, and it seems a bold request. "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." The first thing to notice is that Elisha knows what is Elijah's treasure and it is his spirit. It is Elijah's spirit that connects him with God so that God can work through Elijah to work miracles and to speak truth to the people. But why does Elisha ask for a double share? Does he want to be twice as powerful as Elijah? Maybe. But I think it's more likely that Elisha has in mind how inheritance rights worked in those days. When the father dies, the first born son is to receive a double portion of the inheritance. So Elisha is claiming the role of first born son and asking for a double portion of his inheritance. Elijah acknowledges

that what Elisha is asking for is a difficult thing. This inheritance is not the same thing as land and material wealth. It is an inheritance that is tied to their relationship with God. Elijah's prophetic inheritance is actually connected to God's purposes. Nevertheless, Elijah tells Elisha that if he is able to see God take him then his request will be granted. And as we learn, Elisha watches Elijah be carried up into the sky riding a fiery chariot. His request is granted. He is empowered by God to continue the work of a prophet.

What would you ask from your mentor before you say good bye? Would you be so bold as to ask your mentor to give you a double portion of their spirit? Maybe that is too much to ask, a difficult thing indeed. How do you give someone your spirit? Maybe you could simply ask for a blessing, to have your mentor pray for you, to tell you how proud the mentor is of you and how grateful the mentor is that you will continue the work. I don't know what it would be. But I hope that when the time comes for you to say good bye to your mentor that you won't miss the opportunity to humbly ask from your mentor just one more thing, something that you can receive and hold on to. Because I can imagine that the parting gift your mentor offers you will be treasured within your heart. It will be a source of courage when life gets scary, of assurance when you are feeling discouraged. To get one last good word from your mentor, what a gift that would be.

The final thing I want to say about the story of Elijah and Elisha is what happens after the chariot swings low to collect Elijah and carry him up to heaven. Not everything that happened was read this morning. We did hear what Elisha called out and how he ripped his clothes into two pieces. This is a traditional act of mourning. The departure of his master has struck him with grief. But then he looks down and sees Elijah's mantle which fell off his shoulders and floated down to the ground. He picks it up and walks back to the Jordan. Striking the water with the mantle Elisha asks, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" At once, the water parts from one side to the other, allowing Elisha to walk back across into Judah on dry land. He returns to continue the work of a prophet, possessing the mantle that once belonged to Elijah, his spirit connected to God's like Elijah's. He has the power and the authority to

do what Elijah did, to work the miracles, to speak God's word to the people. But Elisha remains his own person. He does the work in his own way. He is not an Elijah clone. He makes his own contribution to the prophetic tradition.

At some point we all will have to relinquish our tasks. We will have to lay our mantles down. Whether it be retirement, or a radical change in our physical or mental capacity, or the closure that death brings, a time will come when each of us will have to entrust the work that needs done for the next generation to tend to *as they see fit*. It's not about trying to clone the next generation to do everything the way we have done things. Those who follow us will continue the work, will carry the tradition forward, will see to it that the church of Jesus Christ remains, but they will do it in their own way. And we have to trust that the next generation will be faithful, that they will pick up the mantle and carry it for a season until the time comes for them to pass it on to the next. It will be different. But it will be o.k. And we can be assured that the church will be in good hands because the church does not belong to us. The church belongs to Jesus, the one who said even the gates of hell will not prevail. The church of Jesus Christ will always exist until Christ returns and firmly establishes the reign of God, when there will be new heavens and a new earth. So when the time comes for us to relinquish the mantle of faith, we can be assured that God will continue to move in the hearts of another generation to pick up the mantle of faith and continue God's redeeming work in the world.

Now I am not suggesting that any of us need to be relinquishing anything right now. The mantle is on our shoulders now. Every one of us has the responsibility to do God's work now. We don't get to retire from being a disciple of Jesus Christ. We don't get to retire from our responsibilities as members of his body, the church. Our responsibilities change. What we are able to do certainly changes as our life situation changes and as our bodies wear out. But we can't just lay the mantle down and walk away. Well, I guess you could. None of us are forced to be disciples. God is love, so God does not coerce. We are not chained to God's side. We can always walk away from God, even though God never walks away from us. No, this is our time to be faithful, to commit

ourselves to God and to the world God loves, to represent Jesus by our love for God and for one another. Now is our time to do the work.

But at some point, our days will come to an end. The time will come when we will lay the mantle down. Our work in this life will come to an end and we will enter in to our rest.

So here's the question for us: when we lay the mantle down, who are the mentees we will lay it down for? Who are the ones that we have mentored along the way? We all need mentors in the faith who have been living this life a bit longer than we have, who have learned some lessons that we need to learn. I hope you have such mentors or are looking for a spiritual mentor who can guide you. Everyone needs a Yoda right? But, this is my challenge, to myself and to all of you. Are you open and willing to be a mentor for the generation that follows us? It doesn't matter how old you are, whether you are a teenager or in your nineties, you have experiences with the ways of God that you can share. You have made mistakes that others need to learn from. You have had those moments where something about God became more clear to you, those aha moments when things started to make more sense. You have had your times of struggle, when God seemed distant and your prayers didn't seem to get much past the ceiling, when you were angry at God, or maybe even bored with this Jesus stuff. You have gained some wisdom along the way. Are you open and willing to share it if someone comes along looking for a spiritual friend, a guide, a mentor? Will you be that mentor so that when the time comes for you to lay your mantle down you will know who will pick it up and carry on the work?