

It's All Yours

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 06/30/19

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

When I interviewed with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee at my first appointment in Sheboygan as the Associate Pastor, I spent a good deal of my time during the day with the Senior Pastor with whom I'd be working when I came back to begin the appointment.

He showed me around town; he entertained me by having evening dinner at a restaurant on top of the 8th floor of the tallest building in Sheboygan; he introduced me to the staff; he showed me the church; he drove me over to the motel where I stayed the night.

In the midst of all that, I had about 5 or 10 minutes to meet with my predecessor; the Associate Pastor whose shoes I'd be filling. I got the feeling he wasn't leaving on the best of terms. He was only there for one year. He handed me a badminton racket he received from his predecessor that was the official "bat exterminator" at St. Luke. And then, at the end of our brief conversation he said, "Well, it's all yours."

"Well, it's all yours." Just what Elisha felt the day Elijah departed to heaven. Just what the disciples felt when they saw Jesus make his final ascension to heaven.

"It's all yours now." In Great Britain they say, "That makes me feel somewhat uncomfortable."

I wonder if any of you have ever found it difficult to let go. You ever remember a goodbye where one person, or maybe both, have held the hug a bit longer than you normally would.

Elijah is the old prophet. Wise and experienced, weathered by the storms of life and strengthened by the things he has seen and suffered, he was the prophet people most looked up to in the Old Testament.

In the passage we read today about the end of his life on earth, he parts the waters of the Jordan River, recalling Moses at the Red Sea, and he ascends to heaven, rising into the sky in a prefiguring of the ascension of Jesus.

Elijah was a big deal, just as we look at our mentors and see a big deal.

In today's story, we meet Elisha, the prophet who is to come after Elijah. And they both know that Elijah's time is almost up. The last few conversations they have are exactly the kind of conversations we all have with our mentors. Elijah is making final stops at all of the most important places in Israel. "The Lord has sent me to Bethel," says Elijah. "You stay here." Elisha wants to come and pleads to be taken along. The same thing happens with a trip to Jericho and another one to the Jordan River. At each step along the way, people approach Elisha, saying, "You know, we heard your master is going away," and Elisha says, "Don't talk about it," almost as if he is in denial about what must inevitably take place. And he keeps begging Elijah to take him along on all of those final journeys, and Elijah continues to agree but still keeps urging his young friend, "Stay here; there's no reason for you to go with me." It's as if Elijah knows that no matter how many trips they take, no matter how many words of wisdom are shared, he knows that soon it will be over. And he also knows that Elisha will finally begin to learn what it really means to be a prophet only when he, Elijah, has gone.

When the actual departure of Elijah finally takes place, after all of the buildup, it is so sudden. They are not in a well-known or marked place; they are walking along in the middle of nowhere and a chariot scoops up Elijah and carries him away into the sky. Just like that, no final words, he's gone. It is interesting to me that, those of us who spent time in Sunday School learning the Bible probably remember this piece of Bible trivia: Question: "Who ascended into heaven riding a chariot into the sky?" Answer: "Elijah"—as if the story is all about the one who leaves. But the fact is, for us, stories about losing someone

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are not just about the person who dies; they're also about the ones who are left behind. None of us know what is waiting for us on the other side.

But many of us know what it means to be left here when they are gone. Elisha was left. So the story says, "Elisha was watching, and he cried out, 'Oh, my father, my father! Israel's chariots and its riders!' When he could no longer see him, Elisha took hold of his clothes and ripped them in two." Elisha is left alone.

What can he say but "My God, my God . . . why did you take him away?" And he ripped his clothes in two, because that's what you did in their culture to show grief.

This year we have two high school students who have graduated: Scott Frost, Sarah Stouffer-Lerch, Kaylyn King, Jenya Christiansen, and Emily Hron. And Jessica Peters received a Master's Degree as well.

It's a tough call whether it's harder to be the one making a new transition in life or the one who watches their child make those changes. The one is heading to new experiences; but the parents vicariously replay all the possibilities in their minds.

Maybe it's knowing that a goodbye will be happening at some point shortly. Or maybe it's the goodbye of two lovers, or two friends.

Or maybe, like today's scripture, it's the goodbye of a beloved mentor who showed you things you'll take with you wherever you go in life. Elijah had opened heaven to earth, and that's why he was known as a prophet – one of the greatest; one of the best. And now Elisha is facing the question, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?"

Elijah is Elisha's mentor.

When Elijah turns to his young friend Elisha and asks, "What do you want me to do for you before I am taken away?" And Elisha answers, "Give me a double portion of your spirit." I gotta believe that, in that strange statement, Elisha is trying to say, "I know that I don't have half your intellect or experience; I'm not half the prophet you are; so please do something: pray for me that I'll have what it takes to carry on when you're gone."

What Elisha does receive is the awareness that whatever Elijah has taught him up to now, will have to be enough; he must go on alone. "It's all yours, now."

And in those moments when we realize that, well, "it's all yours now" -- when we feel most profoundly lost and alone and unclear about what to do, it is at those times that God is holding us the closest.

Many of us learn and grow the most at the moments when we are thrown into the deep end, called to face a situation we did not see coming and for which we may not feel fully prepared.

No matter who you are, life is full of those situations, and I doubt they ever go away entirely: we will spend our entire lives being surprised by new challenges, even long after we have become mentors to others.

My hunch is that our wisest coaches present us with these situations intentionally because they have their own memories of feeling unprepared, ill-equipped, and alone, and they know that we, like them will rise out of our loss, pray and cry our way through challenges, and will one day realize that we now have something to pass on to the ones who follow us.

It is perhaps in sharing that experience that we come to know we are not as alone as we thought we were. Amen.