

A sermon preached at Zion, North Branford

3rd Sunday of Pentecost, year A

June 30, 2019

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Throughout human history there have always been heroes and giants; those individuals who seem larger than life because of the great things that they have done to benefit humanity. The heroes risked and sometimes lost their lives to save others from abominable circumstances and gross injustices. Their compassion, courage, and their sacrifice changed laws and changed hearts. And the giants of discovery- those men and women who by their gifts and grit propelled human thought and endeavor beyond anything that had come before. They improved the quality of life for countless millions who came after them. We know their names and teach them to our children.

Elijah and Elisha were two such figures, who defended the people during a time of unjust rulers. Elijah stood up to King Ahab and upheld the worship of God. Elisha looked up to Elijah and dared to dream that he could emulate his mentor and perhaps do things as great or even greater than him-daring even to ask for double Elijah's spirit. Now Elisha was well aware of how Elijah's outspokenness had been received, how King Ahab had wanted to kill that 'troubler of Israel.' But despite his knowledge of the dangers inherent in the prophetic task, Elisha yearns to follow in the footsteps of Elijah; to take up Elijah's mantle and step out in faith for a just cause. He had the desire, but did not know if this would come to pass. Would God empower him for such a risky calling?

In the story we heard this morning, it is the end of Elijah's time on earth and Elisha accompanies him on his way. Twice Elijah tells his disciple that the time has come for them to part ways because God is leading him further on. And twice Elisha tells his teacher that he will not leave him. After Elijah is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elisha dares to pick up the mantle that had fallen from Elijah and tests it out by striking the water of the Jordan River with it. In a scene reminiscent of the giant of all prophets, Moses-the water parts and Elisha is able to walk across.

In every generation, we are faced with the temptation to seek security instead of power and to stay safe and comfortable in the face of difficult circumstances. When confronted with injustice, we have a choice; we always have a choice: to look the other way or to go out on a limb and follow in the footsteps of those who came before us in faith. Whether or not we are ordained, we are part of the lineage of those who followed the call to live into God's dream of mercy and justice. As Isaac Newton said, "We see farther because we stand on the shoulders of giants." We can see, sometimes, just one more step ahead. In our generation, we can take one more step to move closer to God's dream. We can trust that God is at work in this as in all things.

Like Elisha, we do not know if all things will work out according to our plans. Like Jesus' first disciples, we do not know what awaits us if we follow where Christ leads. We do know that God will never leave us alone. God is with us in every trial we face. It can help to know as well, that we are surrounded too, by that great cloud of witnesses that came before us, those who paved the way which brought us to this point.

I have a poem to share this morning. But before I do, I want you to imagine Elijah's mantle. How it sheltered him from rain when he wore it as a hood. How it kept him warm in cool weather and sheltered him from the harsh sun in summer. What color was it? Imagine all the threads woven into it. Imagine now, it being laid in your hands.

## **Blessing of Elijah by Jan Richardson**

Make no mistake.  
This blessing that comes  
like hands laid  
upon your head,  
a mantle draped  
across your shoulders:  
you do not bear it  
alone.

Think of it  
as lineage,  
as litany:  
an ancient legacy  
entwining you among the strands  
that weave through  
generations and centuries,  
that spiral with the enduring and  
determined grace  
of the story that has  
seized you, and the One  
who has claimed  
and called you.

Take heart  
that this blessing  
comes to you  
singed and  
scorched, signed by the blazing  
of wonders you can barely imagine  
and by trials  
that have already tested you,  
or you would not  
have found your way  
this far.

Lay it down,  
and it will be a path for you  
across terrain  
you never imagined  
daring to cross.

Take it up,  
and know the presence  
of those who have passed this  
onto you:  
who encompass you  
who enfold you  
who go with you  
and release you  
into the keeping  
of the road  
that is your own  
and the One  
who has called  
your name.

By our Baptisms, each and every one of us has been given the mantle of Christ. We are the descendents of all those who came before us in the faith. We too, have been prepared for the times that we now face. It is time for us to take up the mantle, to put our hands to the plow and go forth doing that which God has called us to do—to seek justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. Amen.

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