

“Pick Up and Go”

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February 15, 2015 Transfiguration (Year B) and Take Up Your Cross

2 Kings 2:1-14

Mark 9:2-9

Do you think of yourself as a spiritual leader? You must be strong-hearted and committed to come out on a cold and windy day like this. But do you consider yourself a spiritual leader?

Michael read a story this morning about two great spiritual leaders: Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was a powerful prophet in the 9th century BC, known for his fearless devotion to the truth and many amazing miracles. Elisha was a prophet-in-training. He followed Elijah around and helped him until it was time for Elijah to leave this earth.

Right before he was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah asked Elisha what he could do for him, before he was taken away. And Elisha said, “Please, let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” A double share was the right of a first-born son. Elisha was asking to be Elijah’s spiritual successor. And Elijah answered, you have asked for a hard thing. (Still,) if you see me when I am being taken from you, it will happen; but if you don’t see me, it won’t.

Up to this point it looked like Elijah was doing all he could to keep Elisha from seeing him. He kept telling Elisha to stay behind with all the rest of the prophets as he went on to the next town. How was Elisha supposed to see, if he didn’t go with Elijah? So Elisha kept answering, I will not leave you!

I always wonder why Elijah did that. Why keep telling Elisha to stay behind? After all, he was the one who found Elisha and called him to follow (1 Kings 19:19). Did he want to spare Elisha the grief of seeing him go? Or maybe it was a test, to see whether Elisha was the kind of person who simply obeyed orders, or whether he could act for himself. A true prophet couldn’t be afraid to stand apart from the crowd.

If this was a test, Elisha passed it. He didn’t listen to Elijah and stay back with the other prophets. He followed his heart, his own sense of what he should do. He would stick with Elijah to the very end. There were 50 other prophets there. But they were watching from a distance and didn’t see. Elijah was in the right place at the right time. He had to persist to get there. But his eyes were open to see. And he took up the mantle or cloak that fell from Elijah, parted the water, and crossed over the Jordan River to begin his life as a spiritual leader.

In the story of the transfiguration that Barbara read this morning, the disciples saw what was happening on the mountain, but they didn’t understand. It was an amazing sight, with dazzling light all around. But the disciples were overwhelmed with fear, and Peter blurted out, “It’s a good thing we’re here. We can make you some little houses... we can build something...” as though one could capture the moment in building or monument.

In the gospel of Mark, the disciples were never known for their spiritual brilliance. They never quite understood what was going on. But they did see Jesus glowing with dazzling light. And when they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about what they saw until after he had risen from the dead. Only then would they start to understand.

Up until the time of Jesus, most religious activity was dependent on great leaders: Moses, Elijah, Elisha and the other great prophets. They were the ones to shine, and to be surrounded by clouds and whirlwinds. And Jesus took his place among them. But Jesus was about to do something new. Jesus did not intend to pass his spirit on to one great leader. He was going to take these clueless disciples down the mountain, and start the journey to Jerusalem, where they would face conflict, suffering and doubt. Jesus would be taken from them too. But he was not to choose one special person to succeed him. In his death and resurrection, the spirit of God would move from one great leader, to 12 more or less ordinary ones, and then multiply to thousands, and eventually millions of ordinary people spreading the spirit of God all over the world.

That's the message and power of Christ. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to all of us, whether we are great or small, and calls us to let the light of God shine through us in the world. That may seem like a lot for ordinary people like us. But in the reformed tradition we believe there's never just one person who has the spirit and then passes it on to another single person.

People like to give credit or blame to a single leader when something good or bad is accomplished. But unless the ordinary people step up and own it too, the leaders have little effect. We all share the power.

Years ago Bishop Desmond Tutu served on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After the system of apartheid was dismantled, there was a great danger of riots and bloodbaths between people seeking revenge. Rather than holding trials to punish crimes on both sides, which would inevitably lead to lying and cover-ups and more desire for revenge, the government tried something completely different. They held public hearings with the aim of uncovering the truth, and providing restitution and reconciliation. It was emotionally wrenching to hear the horrible stories of torture, but Tutu was amazed at the process; the willingness of some to confess their crimes, and the incredible capacity of others to forgive. Not everyone was satisfied with the results. But the general consensus is that the process was successful.

Tutu questioned how this could happen in South Africa, but not in Rwanda or the Middle East. He gave credit to some strong leaders on both sides who were ready to risk their political careers and lives to stand for peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation.* But he wrote that most of the real work of forgiveness was done by ordinary people. "South Africans are... not peculiar. Perhaps it would be better to say that there are so-called ordinary people in each nation... who are capable of some extra-ordinary accomplishments."*

God has mostly ordinary people to work with on this earth. Most of us are not like Elisha, who was ready and able to take it all on at once. We are more like the group of prophets who were just milling around like sheep saying, "Something's going to happen! Something's going to happen!" But everyone is capable of listening to God and following their heart. We may not be able to see chariots of fire come down from heaven, but we can be where God is. Half of being a spiritual leader is simply being in the right place at the right time, visiting the friend who is lonely or sick, showing up at a memorial service or funeral, dishing up food in a soup kitchen, standing with those who have been denied justice, working for understanding, mercy, forgiveness and truth wherever it is needed. And if we are in the right place with open eyes and hearts, God

can do amazing things. We just have to be willing to pick up the mantle of the spirit and go.

This Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, an important time in the life of the church. We are entering the road to Jerusalem, preparing for what is to come during Holy Week, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And just as Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle to carry on his work, so Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and follow him.

To pick up the cross does not mean we think it's great to be crucified. Hopefully no one here will ever have to be a martyr. But it does mean we are not out to protect ourselves or dominate others. Instead, we step up to walk in the way of Christ, taking the role of a servant, and knowing that God can work through any one of us. And we are ready and willing to be there.

Today we gather at the table for communion. At this table we remember Jesus' last supper with his disciples before he was arrested and crucified. As he broke bread and took a cup of wine, he told them that his body would be broken and his life poured out. And as they shared the bread and cup with him and each other, they declared their allegiance, their intention to follow him and do their part.

And as we take our place at the table and share in the bread and cup today, we affirm our allegiance to Christ, to the way of integrity in the face of evil, the way of truth over lies, the way of forgiveness and self-giving love over violence and domination, the way of life over death.

And after we share in communion, you are invited to come to the table during the last hymn and pick up a cross to take with you, as a declaration of your response to Christ's call to go into the world in the power of the spirit and walk in the spiritual power of Christ. We pick up and go, to lift high the cross, proclaiming the love of Christ, til all the world is reconciled to God. Amen.

* Tutu, Desmond, No Future Without Forgiveness, Doubleday, NY, NY. 1999. Page 42 and 155.