

Mentoring Friends: Elijah and Elisha

Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 16, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

1 Kings 19:19-21

¹⁹So he [Elijah] set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. ²⁰He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” ²¹He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

2 Kings 2:9-14

⁹When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” ¹⁰He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” ¹¹As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹²Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

¹³He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

Today, in the fifth sermon of our Friendship and Faithfulness series, we meet Elijah and Elisha, two of God's greatest prophets and miracle-workers, whose ministries spanned more than eighty years.

I searched my Bible from front to back. I couldn't find the word “mentor” even once. Nonetheless, there are mentors in the Bible. Mentor is a word we all use and understand. If we've had one or two good mentors in our lives, we've been deeply blessed. Elijah was a mentor to his young friend Elisha.

Elijah

In the book of Kings, many of the kings of Israel and Judah get a “report card.” A few kings did what was right in God's eyes, but most did not. Generally, they were a bad lot and King Ahab of Israel was the worst of the bunch. He “did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30). And his wife was no better. Her name was Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel abandoned the LORD God and became worshippers of Baal, the chief Canaanite god. And one day, Elijah the Tishbite came calling.

The Book of Kings

A couple of weeks ago, we learned that the stories of David and Jonathan are from the book of Samuel, a single literary work that is divided into two parts in the Old Testament. The stories of Elijah and Elisha are from the book of Kings. It too is a single work, even though it is divided into 1 and 2 Kings.

The book of Kings is aptly named. It tells the story of Israel from the time of King David's death until the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Babylonians more than 400 years later. Throughout this period God's people were ruled by kings.

The book of Kings can get pretty confusing if you don't understand the division of the kingdom. David was succeeded on the throne by his son, Solomon. Solomon was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, who immediately alienated the ten tribes of Israel that lived in the northern portion of the kingdom. The kingdom split in two. In the north was the kingdom of Israel with the city of Samaria as its capital. In the south was the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital. The book of Kings tells the story of the two kingdoms in parallel until the northern kingdom of Israel is destroyed by the Assyrians in 722BC. The kingdom of Judah survived another 140 years until it was overrun by the Babylonians.

Speaking for the LORD God, Elijah confronted Ahab and predicted a drought. Since Baal was the god of storm and rain in the Canaanite pantheon, Elijah's prediction of drought was a direct challenge. It would be the LORD v. Baal. This 'competition' would come to a head when Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to a contest (see 1 Kings 18; this is a great story!). But the contest was not really a contest at all. Baal was a complete no-show. On that day, Elijah showed all those who had ears to hear and eyes to see that the LORD God was not merely the best god on the block, the LORD was the only God, the creator and ruler of all that was, is, or will be. Baal was no more than a figment of people's spiritual imagination.

Needless to say, Ahab and Jezebel were not happy about Elijah's triumph in the contest. So Elijah fled and hid at Mt. Horeb (also called Mt. Sinai) where Moses had met God. There, God spoke to Elijah, telling him that Elisha, son of Shaphat, was to be his successor as God's prophet.

Elisha

So Elijah left the mountain and sought out Elisha. Elijah found the young man plowing his field. As Elisha guided his oxen, Elijah tossed his own mantle¹ over the younger man; Elisha had been

called by God. Elisha would leave everything to follow after Elijah. He even slaughtered his ox and sold all his farm equipment. There was no going back. Elisha committed himself 100%.

Later, after the death of Ahab, it was time for Elijah to leave this life. With Elisha standing near him, Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot riding upon a whirlwind. Elisha had asked that he might receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit and, indeed, as Elijah ascended upward his mantle fell back to earth landing beside Elisha. He picked it up and, like Elijah, used it to part the waters of the Jordan river. The protégé would now carry on the work of his mentor.

On a personal level, Elisha's ministry would be a ministry of life. He would restore to life a young boy who had died. He would save many lives by purifying a pot of poisonous stew. He would feed a hundred men with a few scraps. But Elisha would also follow in the political footsteps of his mentor. Elisha confronted the kings who turned away from the LORD. He played a key part in several Israelite victories. He was even instrumental in the overthrow of a king. Elisha never shirked away from the responsibilities given him by God and passed on to him by Elijah.

Mentors and friends

The book of Kings doesn't tell us much about the personal relationship of Elijah and Elisha. What we do know is that their relationship was unique among all the Old Testament prophets. Elijah passed his mantle on to Elisha. They worked side by side. After Elijah's departure, Elisha pressed forward with their work. Surely, they were friends.

Who is a *true* prophet?

A prophet is someone who speaks for God. It seems that there was no shortage of prophets during the age of the kings, or at least those who claimed to speak for God. For example, 1 Kings 22 tells of hundreds of prophets in the court of King Jehoshaphat. Regrettably, the entire bunch told the king what he wanted to hear – that he would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail . . . and he did. One mark of a true prophet of God was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet.

In his notes on Kings in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Claude Mariottini outlines several tests that separate true prophets from false prophets. These include (1) Is the prophet willing to tell the community what they don't want to hear?, (2) Is the prophet vindicated by what actually happens?, and (3) Does the prophet lead people toward or away from worship of the one true God? Finally, "the most trustworthy prophet is the one who will seek guidance from the LORD; who will share with the community what has been seen and heard; and who will continue with the community to test and clarify the word, open always to further guidance" (p. 523).

¹ A mantle was a broad strip of cloth, much like a large shawl, that was worn across the shoulders as an outer garment. Elijah's mantle functioned for him much like Moses' staff. Still today, we use the phrase "passing the mantle of leadership."

Daily Bible Readings

(stories of Elijah and Elisha)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Kings 17 We meet Elijah, who is fed by ravens and revives a dead boy.</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Kings 18 Elijah comes out of hiding and confronts the priests of Baal.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Kings 22 The prophet Micaiah stands alone and strong in the counsel of the Lord.</p>	<p>Day 4 2 Kings 2 Elisha succeeds Elijah.</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Kings 4 Elisha's ministry of life – he acts to bring, sustain, or restore life and avert death.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at www.standrewumc.org.

Please visit one next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

“Mentor” was actually a person’s name! The word comes from Homer’s *Odyssey*, the ancient Greek epic. Mentor was a friend of Ulysses and was entrusted with the education of Ulysses’ son, Telemachus. Thus, we use the word to mean a trusted advisor and guide, someone who helps a protégé learn the ropes and guides them toward a better understanding of themselves and their vocation. Some of us have direct experience with mentors in the workplace. In some organizations, there are formalized programs to identify, assign, and encourage mentoring relationships. But even outside such programs, effective mentoring happens, in the workplace and in our personal lives.

Have you been a part of a mentoring relationship? Were you the mentor or the protégé? You might make a list of important ways in which those roles differ. Have you been a part of a mentoring relationship that did not begin in friendship but blossomed into one? In my own experience, it doesn’t take long for mentor and protégé to become friends, often very close friends. Why would this be? Could at least part of this have to do with trust?

A successful mentoring relationship will come to be grounded in trust. Obviously, the protégé needs to trust the mentor. But likewise, the mentor must be willing to take risks in the development of the protégé. The best mentoring relationships in the workplace are built upon mutual trust in one another’s competence and character. Because trust underlies all true friendships, we can expect that effective mentoring relationships will blossom into friendships.