

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
June 30, 2019
Title: The Inheritance of (Em)Power(ment)
Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14
Luke 9:51-62

During this coming week, we will celebrate the United States Independence Day. There will be picnics, cookouts, parades, fireworks, speeches and a variety of events. Growing up, I always heard that the United States was the most powerful country in the world, and that the President of the United States was the most powerful person in the world.

This week, over two nights, there was a debate in which 20 hopeful Democrats tried to make their case to our electorate about why he or she should become that “most powerful person.” There were some memorable moments and, in the next year there will be more and more speeches, claims, counterclaims, and more rhetoric than most of us will be able to tolerate.

As I thought about today’s scripture about Elijah and Elisha, I was struck by the 40-year age span of the current candidates for the Democratic nomination, the oldest being 77 and the youngest 37. In today’s scripture we see the younger Elisha eager to learn from the older Elijah who has been his teacher and will soon be leaving him.

In sharp contrast was a comment made in the debate by the second youngest candidate. He said, “I was 6 years old when a presidential candidate came to the California Democratic convention and said it’s time to pass the torch to a new generation of Americans. That candidate was then senator Joe Biden.” He continued, “Joe Biden was right when he said it was time to pass the torch to a new generation of Americans 32 years ago. He’s still right today.”ⁱ

Now, I have no intention of discussing either of these two candidates or any others at the moment, but I was struck by the contrast between this comment and what we find in today's scripture about transfer of power.

In the Bible, it seems that power is transferred to others so that they can help carry the burdens, help work to solve the problems, continue the work being done, and most importantly to carry out the work of God. Although there are exceptions, the transfer of power, or the inheritance of power was more of a sacred trust being handed to another, not something to be wrested away or claimed because it was time for the older to get out of the way and let the younger finally take control.

Now, don't get me wrong, I want to believe that the candidate who was asking Joe Biden to get out of the way and make room for younger people has the best intentions of wanting to be part of solving some very big problems, and in all fairness, it is hard to compete with people who are well known and carry a lot of power or influence (and in politics – name recognition).

But I think we can learn some important things from Elijah and Elisha. First, let me remind you a little about who they are. Elijah and Elisha were both prophets in ancient Israel. Elisha was essentially a follower of Elijah, an apprentice, if you will, learning from his teacher.

Prophets often advised kings on what God wanted them to do. Elijah was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab. Among other things he is known for raising a child from the dead, and for winning a contest with over 400 priests of the Canaanite storm god Baal. He appears in the New Testament in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus where Jesus is suddenly seen talking with Moses and Elijah.

Elijah, whose name means “Yahweh is my God”, was often in trouble and more than once fled for his life. He lived mostly alone and in caves.

In today’s scripture, it is time for Elijah to leave his student Elisha. Elisha does not want Elijah to leave. He begs him to stay and he insists on staying with Elijah even when Elijah tries to leave him behind. He clings to being with Elijah.

As they come to the Jordan River, Elijah takes his mantle (a loose shawl like garment), rolls it up and strikes the water. The water parts and he and Elisha cross on dry ground. It is a reminder of the time when Moses raised his rod and parted the waters of the Red Sea so that the Hebrew people could cross on dry ground.

Elijah knows how difficult this is for Elisha and finally asks him, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you?” We can learn from Elijah that during times of transition and change it is important to think about the needs of the others. It is important to recognize and think about the effect the change will have on their lives. It is important to recognize that if we are the one leaving, that we are tossing a bunch of loose ends into their laps – things that they will have to deal with, without us.

When Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him, Elisha responds by asking to inherit a double share of Elijah’s spirit. It’s important to realize here, that Elisha isn’t saying, “Let me be twice as good as you” or twice as powerful. Rather, Elisha is recognizing who Elijah is, who he has been in Elisha’s life, and he is asking if he can be like Elijah.

In the inheritance laws, an equal portion of a what a man had was given to each of his sons, except that the first born, received an extra portion, a double share. Elisha is asking to be like Elijah’s first born, and to inherit an extra share of Elijah’s spirit.

“Ancient peoples believed that God-given charismatic gifts could be apportioned out or transferred to others, as when God gave some of Moses’ spirit to the 70 elders in the wilderness” so that they could help carry the burden of the people. (Numbers 11:16-17)

This scripture provides a vivid word picture of power and mystery. “As 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.” You have probably seen pieces of art depicting this scene. It is awe-inspiring, and quite frankly, rather scary as well.

But Elisha is left standing there. He discovers Elijah’s mantle lying on the ground and picks it up. He walks back to the bank of the Jordan and repeated the action that Elijah had so recently done. He struck the water with the mantle and the water parted to one side and to the other and he crossed over on dry ground.

“The same God who was with Elijah now demonstrates God’s power through Elisha. Elisha’s new ownership of the mantle symbolizes the transfer of power from prophet to prophet.”ⁱⁱ

Elisha not only has received the power that Elijah had but, more importantly, he is empowered by his relationship with Elijah. He will need this as he seeks to carry out the legacy of his mentor. Elisha seems less well known in scripture than Elijah, but he is “portrayed as a wise man, who performed wonders to help his nation and meet the needs of individuals. Unlike Elijah, who was mostly alone and lived in caves, Elisha lived in cities and traveled with groups of prophets.”ⁱⁱⁱ Elisha would prophesy through the reigns of 4 kings of Israel.

So other than being a great story, I think that this relates to us today in several different ways.

First, as we have seen, in this time of transition, Elijah took the time to pay attention to what Elisha needed. He knew that this would be a drastic change for Elisha, and he took the time to find out what Elisha thought he needed. There is a tendency among humans to think we know what someone else needs. If we want to help, sometimes we just rush in, not taking the time to find out what the other person really needs right then; what will be most helpful, what he or she is feeling. Sometimes when we rush in to help, we can cause more damage, if we don't take the time to find out what the real needs are.

When we are in transition, it is also easy to get caught up in our own needs and to forget to pay attention to what others are thinking, what they are afraid of, or what they are excited about.

Last Sunday, after worship, we had an SPRC meeting and at that time we talked a little bit about the Next Chapter task force. Essentially what was expressed was confusion about what this group is doing. My response was that one of the reasons people are confused is because we also are confused. When we met with our coach Monday night, we discussed this, and we were reminded that what we are feeling at this point is very normal.

We are feeling a bit overwhelmed, and more than a little confused. We recognize that some decisions will need to be made including, but definitely not limited to, whether or not this church can continue to support and needs a full-time pastor. It can be easy to get caught up in the practical questions of what needs to be done when and to miss the much larger questions of how we can be the church that God is calling us to be – and what that looks like.

We are not the group that will make these decisions. Those decisions will be made by our entire congregation, and right now we are in a learning phase and so Elijah and Elisha are important to us. As a congregation, we need to learn from each other. We need to learn from the saints and prophets who are no longer with us. They have given us an amazing physical setting and a mantle to carry with us into the future.

One of the things that struck me about this passage is the power of the scene, - the chariot of fire and horses of fire separating them, and Elijah ascending in a whirlwind. But I also remember, Elijah fleeing for his life. He fled into the desert and wanted to die. But God sent a messenger to give him food, just as God had provided food in the desert for Moses and the Hebrew people. Refreshed by the food, Elijah traveled to Mount Horeb and went into a cave.

When God sought him out, he was feeling very sorry for himself. He complained that he had been passionate for God. He had done everything he could, but now the Israelites had abandoned God, murdered the prophets, and wanted to kill him too. What follows is the amazing scene of a strong wind coming through, but God wasn't in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake. Then there was a fire, but God wasn't in the fire. After the fire there was quiet and God was in the still, quiet voice.

God listened to his complaints, assured him that he was not alone, that there were more than 7,000 people who had not bowed to another god. God instructed him to go back to Damascus and anoint a king and also to anoint Elisha as his successor.

We don't get all the details, but we get enough to know that God is in control. No matter how discouraged Elijah may feel, no matter how alone

he may feel, God is still present. In one instance, God is present not in the wind, earthquake, or fire but in the silence. In another God is present in the chariot of fire. God leads us wherever we may be, whatever the situation may be. We are invited to trust this God of power, this God who leads us to freedom, this God who can speak through the silence or through the mighty fire.

We have inherited power as followers of Christ. We are empowered as followers of Christ. The power that we have received from God and the ways that we are empowered to act are different than what we see in society. For us, as Christians, it is not about competition. It is not about ridiculing, bullying, or abusing another. It is not about telling others to get out of the way so that we can be in control.

In the gospel reading, when Jesus and his disciples were rejected by those in a village, James and John asked him if they should command fire to come down from heaven and consume the village. But Jesus rebuked them and led them to another village. Jesus did not need to demonstrate power by violence or by hurting another.

Power for Christians is about relationship; relationships that empower each person to be all that God has created us to be. We are called to empower others and to be empowered by them. We have been entrusted with power and empowerment as “weighty inheritances of God.”^{iv} We must be wise stewards of this power and empowerment as we seek to follow God faithfully each and every day.

ⁱ Swalwell, Eric. Representative, D-Calif. In the June 27 Democratic candidate debate. Quoted in the Washington Post.

ⁱⁱ www.gbod.org/worship Material for June 30. “The Inheritance of (Em)Power(ment).”

ⁱⁱⁱ Keeping Holy Time, Year B, p.238-9

^{iv} GBOD notes.