

Passing the Mantle

In the name of him whose glory fills heaven and earth, dear friends in Christ: Today the season of Epiphany, which is all about Jesus revealing to the world exactly who he is, comes to its climax as we join the disciples Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. There, with them, we catch just the briefest glimpse of the divine splendor heretofore hidden within Jesus. It's awesome to behold. They've been calling him *Lord*. They've confessed him to be the Son of God. Now they see with their eyes what their mouths have confessed: that this Jesus is none other than God in the flesh. And with Jesus in the magnificent vision that they are blessed to see are two other men – celestial saints who went before and who are now crowned with glory. There is Moses, the great deliverer of Israel who gave God's people the Law; and there is also the prophet Elijah, who was a champion of the true faith in a very difficult period in Israel's history. The latter is one of only two people ever to have been preserved from having to taste death. Instead, Elijah was transported by the Lord directly into heaven in a whirlwind as we heard in this morning's Old Testament lesson – which, in my mind, would be a very uncomfortable way to travel. I'd think you'd get awfully dizzy.

But whether he got dizzy or not, that too must have been a sight to see; the whole thing: the Jordan parting like when Moses split the Red Sea, the fiery chariots from heaven presumably being driven by equally fiery angels, and then the sudden whirlwind snatching Elijah away ... the young man Elisha, like the disciples, was also given a glorious vision by God as he faithfully attended the man who had been his master and teacher right up until his rather remarkable exodus. But, as we heard, Elisha received more than a fantastic vision, he also received a special blessing of the Spirit as the mantle of prophetic leadership and authority was passed from Elijah to him.

But who was this Elijah who was taken into heaven so? And what did it mean to be the one whom God appointed to fill his sandals after he was gone? Well, truth be told, we really don't know much about Elijah except to say that he was an exceptionally faithful man of God. It may surprise you to learn that everything we do know about him happened in the last three years of his life on earth. And in that way I suppose he's not unlike the Lord Jesus. I mean, apart from the story of Christ's birth and the incident that took place when he was twelve years old, everything we know about his life and ministry also took place in his last three years. And just as an aside, I think there's a message there for all of us. No matter how old you are, the most important work the Lord has for you may yet be ahead.

In any case, what we do know about Elijah in the years that he was making Bible worthy news is that during that time he was probably the most hated man in Israel. Why? It's because he prayed to the Lord to stop the rain, and the Lord answered his prayer. For three years not a drop of moisture fell in the land of Israel. It caused unimaginable suffering as people first lost their livelihoods, land, and fortunes because of the skyrocketing cost of food. Then, as the drought continued, the livestock had to be sacrificed to save water for people; and ultimately, the situation grew so bad that many people died of starvation. No, when the name of Elijah became well known in Israel, there weren't many people saying nice things about him.

So, what was his beef with his homeland? Why did he ask the Lord to withhold the rain? In a word, the problem was apostasy. The people of Israel had turned their backs on the Lord. Led by their king, a man named Ahab, who had taken for himself a wife of the neighboring pagan nation of Sidon, the people of Israel had embraced the worship of the false god Baal. Mind you, none of them would have seen it that way. They would have said something like,

“Look, here in Israel we call God ‘the Lord’, and our Canaanite neighbors call him ‘Baal’. What’s the difference? There’s only one God. Does it matter what we call him or how we worship him? We have our practices, they have theirs. There’s good in every religion. They are all just expressions of the human heart reaching toward the divine. So there’s no reason why we can’t do a little mixing and sharing and adopt some of their practices to help us worship and fully convey our dedication to God. Surely that’s the loving and all-inclusive thing to do. Why, that way, if they came to worship with us, they’d feel right at home. And isn’t that what we want: to be friendly and welcoming to our neighbors?”

Yes, most people would have said something like that. They certainly *would not have seen* their adoption of pagan ideas and practices as a turning away from the Lord. What were some of these practices? Well, besides the normal bowing and offering sacrifices to idols, which was part of all ancient pagan practice, it’s helpful to know that the religion of the Canaanites was basically a fertility cult. Baal was the rain god, and it was thought that he was pleased and would make the rain come when he saw his people engaged in various forms of sexual excess. So you had everything that went with that: cultic prostitution, public orgies, and a lot of stuff best not mentioned from the pulpit. In addition to that, the sacrifice of infants was fairly routine. If you wanted to make Baal really happy, you gave him your baby. That was almost always the fate of the child when one of the cultic prostitutes became pregnant. So, two things should be readily apparent in all this. First, that the people of Israel had an ulterior motive for being so receptive to the idea of blending their religious practices with that of their neighbors: they liked the sexual freedom it gave them – nothing was considered out of bounds. And they could engage in any perversion they wanted and say it was actually a form of worship. The other thing that should be apparent is that the Lord God of Israel, who calls himself a jealous God who will not share his glory with another, and who calls his people to walk before him in holiness and righteousness, was less than pleased with the way things were going.

And so it was that he raised up Elijah to be the advocate and defender of the true faith. And just so it’s clear, we have no record of the Lord coming along, tapping him on the shoulder, and saying, “Elijah, I’ve got a job for you. I want to turn these people back to me, so will you please pray for the rain to stop.” There’s no record of such a conversation, nor would it have been necessary. No, it’s simply that Elijah was a faithful man who could look around and see for himself how far Israel was drifting from the Word of God. That’s key: you don’t need a personal invitation or special mandate from God to stand up for what’s right. If it’s right, then God has already directed you to do it. In this conviction, then, Elijah saw the wasting away of his countrymen, and it broke his heart. He saw that there was already a spiritual drought underway and that souls were dying in droves as a result. So he prayed that the Lord would stop the rain to bring the people to their knees in repentance, and in this way back to himself: the true source and water of life. And the Lord heard and answered his prayer of faith.

You may remember the story of how the drought ended. After three years of being the most wanted and despised man in Israel for having caused a national disaster, Elijah called for a showdown on Mount Carmel. There the people would decide once and for all whom they would serve as their God: Baal or the Lord. Elijah told them it had to be “either or”, not “both and”. He stood alone against 450 prophets of Baal, and there was no doubt about which side was the crowd’s favorite. No one was rooting for Elijah or the Lord. They arranged a simple test: both sides would set up an altar, lay a sacrifice on it, pray to their respective deity, and the one who answered by fire from heaven would be recognized as the one true God.

All day long the prophets of Baal danced and prayed and shouted, but no answer came. Elijah, sitting on the sideline, made wisecracks about their seemingly deaf god and he goaded the prophets with sarcastic advice about how they might attract his attention. Apparently he

never had any sensitivity training. In their desperation, Baal's prophets began to cut themselves, offering their blood to prove their devotion and to beg for his intervention. But still, nothing happened. Finally, when it was nearing sunset, Elijah said, "Okay, you've had your turn. Then he prayed a simple prayer to the Lord, and immediately fire fell from the sky and consumed his sacrifice, altar and all. The people were astonished. They fell down and worshipped the Lord. Then, under Elijah's orders, they rose in fury and slaughtered the 450 false prophets. They now realized that it was not Elijah who had caused their suffering for three years. It was their own faithlessness, their allowing themselves to be led astray, and their watering down the true faith and mixing it with pagan ideas and practices. Because of the faith and courage of one man, the nation was brought to repentance and a return to the truth. And that very night the rain began to fall – in more ways than one.

Now, that's who Elijah was: a man of uncompromising faith; a man who took a bold stand on the truth, and who stepped out in trust, making some very difficult decisions and doing some very unpopular things in order to preserve among his people the worship of the one true and living God and all the blessings that go with it. As he was carried up in the whirlwind, Elisha rightly called him "the chariots and horsemen of Israel". You see, in those days the strength of a nation was measured by the number of war chariots and horsemen it could put in the field for battle. Elisha recognized that the true strength of Israel lay not in the size of its army; but rather in the true and exclusive faith of its people in the Lord God. A people whose God is the Lord can stand against any odds – even against the combined powers of Satan, death, and hell. He understood that Elijah embodied such a faith, and that through his faith the Lord had saved the nation. And so, when he was given the opportunity to ask for a special blessing, Elisha said to Elijah, "I want a double portion of your spirit." That is to say, "I want to be twice as bold and faithful as you." We know that the Lord gave him the spirit and faith he requested. After Elijah was gone, it became obvious to everyone that the mantle had been passed and that Elisha had now become the "chariots and horsemen of Israel" – a mission he performed faithfully and well throughout his life.

But what has all this got to do with us? It's this: here in the church we all recognize the obligation that each generation has to pass down the true faith to the generation that follows. We also recognize that it's not an easy task, especially in today's world. There is constant pressure from the culture around us to distort and compromise the pure biblical message, and our own weak flesh is all too willing to give into it. We are encouraged to be tolerant, inclusive, accepting of new ideas and ways of doing things – and we're called stubborn, arrogant, and unloving when we're not. We're told that there is no such thing as absolute truth, and that we aren't allowed to say or believe that our faith is correct and that others are not. It's not easy to take a stand. Now, no one is telling us to worship the false god Baal. Instead, we are encouraged to worship the gods of this age: pleasure, material wealth, self-sufficiency, and personal freedom – but the results are exactly the same. As a people we've abandoned God-given standards of decency and have given ourselves over to just about every moral vice imaginable. We no longer hold God's institution of marriage or our vows to be sacred. Even in the church we turn a blind eye to couples cohabitating without the commitment of marriage or divorcing and remarrying repeatedly for the most trivial reasons: "We just don't love each other anymore". If anyone says anything, they're told, "It's the way things are now. Get with it." Well, at least we don't sacrifice our children on our altars – instead we sacrifice them in the name of the right to choose, or we let them live and sacrifice their hearts and minds to the television, to the internet, to the X-box, to sports teams, and to the baby-sitter and daycare center while we pursue what we say are the goals in life that really matter.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I realize that everyone has their own situation, and that they're doing the best they can within that context. What I'm pointing to is the fact that

all of us have been influenced by the culture and our own weaknesses. We have all accepted for ourselves a less than scriptural set of beliefs, standards, and practices – and to the degree that we have, we've sold out the truth. We've turned our backs on the Lord God. Earlier I said that each generation has a duty to pass the true faith down whole and intact; but what we see in today's Old Testament lesson is that the generation that receives the mantle of spiritual responsibility has a duty to *want to wear it* – to want to wear it with more faithfulness than the generation that handed it down. That's what we see in Elisha, in his dogged determination not to be left behind by his master and teacher. While all the other prophets stand off at a distance, Elisha clings to Elijah to the very end. He is so determined to get every bit of benefit that the Lord has to give him through his teacher that it takes a fiery chariot to separate him in the end. And for his faithful devotion he is rewarded with both a vision of glory and the spiritual blessing he sought to receive.

Before ascending into heaven himself, Jesus passed the mantle of spiritual authority and responsibility in his church to his disciples. We know that they, like Elisha before them, wore that mantle with bold faithfulness. Most of them wore it to their deaths because they refused to compromise their faith in Jesus Christ. That mantle has been passed down to us through many generations, some wearing it more faithfully than others. But the question is this: How are you wearing it? If you are a confirmed member of the church, then to a certain extent the mantle has been passed to you – and that's especially true if you've been given a position of responsibility in the church. If you're not yet confirmed, then you're preparing to put the mantle on. But in any case, whether you have it already or are preparing to receive it, the question is: Are you an Elisha who prays for a double portion of Elijah's spirit to wear it faithfully and well? Or are you one of the fifty prophets who stand at a distance and miss both the glorious vision and the spiritual blessing? Or worse, are you part of the nameless crowd standing on Mount Carmel that can't make up its mind, that just wants to wait and see what happens, and that secretly hopes that Baal wins the contest? It's time to examine ourselves – and to repent.

Dear friends: our Christian faith is an exclusive faith. There is only one name given under heaven by which we can be saved. It's the name of the Lord Jesus, God's Son, who suffered and died for our sin, and who rose from the dead to declare us his own: the redeemed children of God. In the pages of Holy Scripture he has given us his Word – his whole Word, truthful, complete, unailing – it is the water of life to our thirsty souls. Today we have heard the divine voice from heaven tell us: "Listen to him." May God in his mercy give us the grace to ask for a double portion of Elijah's spirit to do just that: to listen, hold fast, meditate upon, and cling in steadfast faith to the Words of Jesus that we too in our generation may wear the mantle faithfully and be the chariots and horsemen of Israel. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!