

God is Calling!
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
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2 Kings 2: 1-15

Elisha and Elijah.

Elisha is a disciple and co-worker of Elijah. He follows him, not stopping and letting Elijah go, until Elijah is taken up in chariots of fire to heaven. He sees him go, which means his plea, his wish, is granted; he will receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit. He will be a prophet of the highest rank.

All the way along, he is urged to stop and wait. Elijah is leaving, and you should stay here and wait. These disciples are like schools of prophets, gathered in various places to learn from Elijah and others how to be prophets: what to do. How to act. They are all full of advice for Elisha. But Elisha will not be deterred from staying with Elijah. His mentor is leaving, and Elisha means to see him off. They go across the Jordan River, and chariots of fire take Elijah away up into heaven.

Elisha returns from across the Jordan in the confidence of what he is called to do. He is the successor to Elijah. And so the transition of power goes smoothly between Elijah and Elisha.

Elisha had a call. He was called in 1 Kings 19 by Elijah, who recognized in him the qualities that the office of prophet required. Elijah threw his mantle over Elisha, and in so doing, recruited him as a disciple.

Other prophets were called in more direct fashion: read Isaiah 6, for example, and see that Isaiah was called directly by God in a vision he had. But Elisha is called by Elijah.

We all have a call; did you know that? Have you ever thought about that? We have a general call to follow Jesus, that came upon us at our baptism. You were baptized, you have a call. You are called to follow faithfully, to be and do what Jesus calls you to do and be. You are called to follow his way, his lead, to live the life now that he lived then. All who believe are called to this life.

Some of us have a more particular call. That is the call to ministry in a particular service. In my case, it is to the pulpit and the local church congregation. Not everyone gets that kind of call, but some do. So we have the general call for everyone who is baptized, and we have a special call for those whom God calls into the ministry.

There are various ways to respond to this calling. I have known people over the years who become serious about their faith, and who then begin to talk about going to seminary. Some of them should, and indeed did. Others simply had no other idea that a person could respond faithfully to God except by the ministry. Some of them shouldn't have gone to seminary, but did. Some of them shouldn't have and didn't.

In my own case, I went to seminary mostly because I wanted to continue my studies in theology and philosophy. I thank God he steered me to Princeton, a denominational seminary, rather than a graduate school of divinity. Princeton showed me exactly what it took to work in the local parish, and frankly, I was having none of it! It was the birth of my daughter a semester before graduation, and the need to have a job that led me to the local parish. Of course, I worked with a man who was beloved but who was very hard on me because my ideas about ministry were different from his. Somehow through all of that I stayed the course. I even told God, "I will do this but you have to make me like it!" God did that.

Enough about me. What about your call? You have one, you know. Maybe you are working that out as a volunteer in some way. Maybe you have a good idea of what God wants from you. Or maybe you have no idea what God is doing in your life! Maybe you can't see the connection between your work and your call. John Calvin taught us that whatever we are doing in life, be it farming or shopkeeping or whatever, that is in fact our calling. And we are called to do it well, and honestly, serving the people. So I would say, if you are doing that, you are doing well. You are serving God exactly where he wants you to be. But if you have always had this itch to do something else, well, that may be, could be, the Spirit of God urging you to switch careers and do a new thing!

I knew a man in Farmington, Maine, at Mission At The Eastward. MATE, as we call it, is a cooperative ministry among several very small churches that provides housing assistance, food and heat, and things like that in rural Maine. The congregation at Camp Hill had been going there and doing a week's work in the summer each year for more than thirty years. Scott was the director of MATE and pastor of a local church. One summer he confided in me that he was about to announce that he was leaving, that he'd been hired as director of the Maine Seacoast Mission, an organization that works with people on the islands of Maine. It was a very different sort of job, he said, but if he worked there five or six years, he could come back to Farmington in retirement. God was calling him to a new thing!

So Elisha comes back and takes over Elijah's work as a prophet in Israel. He has the mantle of Elijah, which means that he has Elijah's blessing and continues Elijah's work. He isn't called to do everything new, to start over from scratch. One of my pet peeves about our Presbyterian system is that we have this notion that the new pastor gets to do everything a new way, so we can't make any changes during an interim, even those that need to be made. The increasing number of interim pastors means that the presumption is something is wrong, else the pastor would not have left, and since something is wrong, it must be fixed. All of this is nuts, but I will stop now.

Elisha wears the mantle of Elijah, meaning he has Elijah's imprimatur and endorsement. He can carry on Elijah's work in the same spirit as Elijah did. Having the Spirit of Elijah means that both of them were working with and responding to the Spirit of God as they went along. Elijah had the Spirit, and Elisha asked that he be given it as well. Later prophets didn't see it this way; they talked more about the message God had given them to proclaim. Elisha thought of himself as having the Spirit of God just as

Elijah had, a spirit that led him to do things that were symbolic and sometimes outrageous, but which always pointed the people back to God.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this story is the way that Elijah is taken up to heaven. He doesn't lie down and die. He isn't killed. Chariots of fire take him up and away from Elisha. He is carried into heaven without having to die! He and Enoch are the only two people in the Hebrew Scriptures who go to heaven without dying. It isn't that Elijah goes this way as a reward; we saw last week that he is quite human. He is like the rest of us. So what is it?

We don't know the reason, and we aren't told. This was how God chose to do it. A friend of mine once said, "the Presbytery, like the Lord God, can do pretty much whatever it chooses." That was our approach to polity back then. Well, here the Lord God does as he chooses, for reasons that are not entirely clear. But Elijah is taken up in bodily form, and goes up in these fiery chariots. If nothing else, it is very impressive.

You may have read Tolkein's Lord of the Rings trilogy; if not you should! We were watching the movies, which are a good bit darker than the books, focusing mostly on fight scenes. We were watching, and at the end of the third movie, there is a scene where Frodo awakens at Rivendell. He's been through terrifying adventures, but now he is healthy and well. He awakens, and sees Gandalf the wizard, who he thought had died. They both begin to laugh, and then all of Frodo's friends pile into the room. It's a great celebration. It struck me that this might be how it is to die: you wake up, as it were, in a beautiful place, and there is Jesus! He smiles, you both begin to laugh, and then your friends come running in to greet you. Not the same as Elijah being taken up in bodily form, but worth thinking about.

All I can say is, in the New Testament, when they want to talk about Israel's history with God, they refer to "Moses and Elijah." At the Transfiguration, these are the two who appear with Jesus. Moses stands for the Law, and Elijah represents the prophets. So Elijah was highly regarded, and the scriptures reflect that when they tell us he was taken up in chariots of fire. This was done to strengthen the faith of the schools of the prophets and of Elisha himself.

God works in inscrutable, mysterious ways! God does the unexpected, even the unheard-of, because he can. God throws us off guard, and keeps us guessing. We never know what God will do, but we can know this: as mysterious as the Father is, he will never leave us or abandon us, he will not forsake us. We see his love in Jesus Christ, that goes to the cross for us. We see the Spirit, who is with us tirelessly, no matter how far off the path we may wander.

Let us take confidence in our call, whatever it be, however it works out in our lives. Let us do that work with unswerving dedication to God who calls us. Listen for the voice of the Spirit who tells us what we can do next. Whatever we do, let us hear the call of the grace of Jesus Christ, who loves us all.

Thanks be to God! Amen.