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First Presbyterian Church  
August 13, 2023  
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14  
1<sup>st</sup> in A series

### **“The Legacy We Leave: Values vs. Valuables”**

It’s good to be preaching again after what feels like a very long absence. I hope I still remember how to do this thing!

While I was away, I spent a week planning a whole year’s worth of sermons. I’ve never done that before, so I’m curious to see as the year progresses if I stay with my plan. I want to thank all of you who offered suggestions for sermons because many of them made their way into future series.

Today I’m beginning the series “The Legacy We Leave”. Now the New Oxford American Dictionary defines legacy as an “amount of money or property left to someone in a will”, which we’ll talk about in a couple weeks; or “the long-lasting impact of particular events, actions, etc. that took place in the past or of a person’s life.” This is what we’ll reflect on today; the impact of a person’s life. Particularly the impact you’re having, or want to have. What do you want to be known for? What impact do you want to have? What is the legacy you’re leaving? Not the valuables you’re leaving, but the values you’re leaving.

To get us thinking about that, you’ll hear the story of the prophet Elijah passing on his legacy to his protégée Elisha. It’s a lovely story – and one which you may have never heard before. And so I invite you to listen for the word of God as it comes to you today.

## 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

2 Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 2 Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. 7 Fifty men of the company of prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8 Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and the two of them crossed on dry ground.

9 When 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." 10 He 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." 11 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. 12 Elisha 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.

13 He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water. He said, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Where is he?" He struck the water again, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha crossed over.

This is the word of the Lord.

There's a story about a famous preacher who was a bit of a fraud. You see, his sermons were great but he didn't write them. His staff assistant wrote them all. Finally the assistant's patience ran out, and one day the preacher was speaking to thousands of expectant listeners and at the bottom of page two read the stirring words, "And this, my friends, takes us to the very heart of the book of Habakkuk, which is..." only to turn to page three and see nothing but the dreaded words, "You're on your own now." (As told by Dr. Sam Wells in *"Inheriting the Mantle"*, May 8, 2009)

You're on your own now.

I can remember when my parents dropped me off at college freshman year. They didn't waste any time dropping me off and getting out of there – me being the 5<sup>th</sup> kid, they knew I didn't want them hanging around too long. And they were right; I was ready to be on my own. Though I will admit that a sense of homesickness set in about a month into the year when I fully realized that yes indeed, I was on my own now.

When I moved into my first apartment I had another one of those "I'm on my own now" moments when I realized that for the first time ever, I was living alone! Since that didn't sound like much fun, I got a dog – my beloved Roxanne. I always said Roxanne was the best roommate I ever had. She didn't leave dirty tissues lying around and she didn't bring home any strays, and I'd had roommates that had done both!

When we've dropped off our children for their freshmen year at college, I've experienced the "you're on your own now" from the parent perspective. And I have cried when we've left them on their own.

Around the age of 9 months, babies begin to experience separation anxiety; when you leave them at daycare or with a babysitter they cry for mommy or daddy – it's sort of their first bout of "Yikes! I'm on my own now!"

Of course, babies and adults – for the most part – survive it all. As it should be. But it doesn't make the separation any easier.

"You're on your now," is just what Elisha felt when Elijah departed for heaven.

This story describes the transition in leadership from Elijah to Elisha. The fiery Elijah, who has traveled throughout the land for years and made many a priest and king angry because he called them to account for their poor behavior, is getting ready to retire.

Now given the long and illustrious career Elijah had one would think there would be a nice retirement dinner held in his honor where appropriate speeches and gifts would be given. But this is Elijah, who never did things in the traditional way. He's not even going to die, it seems, but rather the Lord plans to take him up into heaven in a whirlwind. Trivia fact: he's the only Old Testament figure that is taken bodily into heaven. Not even Moses had that honor; Moses was buried just like everyone else. But not Elijah; he's going to go out with a bang.

But before he does, he takes one last lap around the old countryside.

"The Lord has sent me to Bethel", he tells his protégée Elisha, "And you're not going with me." Not so fast, Elisha says. I'm going. So off they go.

A little background for you about how this all began. God told Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor, and Elijah reluctantly did that by throwing his mantle over Elisha as he passed by him in a field. Elisha was persistently loyal to Elijah for year, and now he insists on following him all the way to his last moment on earth despite the fact that his mentor tried to lose him two more times.

And at all 3 pit stops Elisha is told by various groups "you know that God is taking to take your mentor away from you, right?" To which Elisha tells them to "keep silent", which is the Bible's nice way of saying "shut up".

Oh, Elisha knows that his mentor, guide, teacher and father-figure isn't going to be around forever. He knows Elijah's time has come. Elisha also knows that he's the top candidate to replace him, the favored son, the one to receive Elijah's blessing. But Elisha isn't sure about his ability to take up the mantle, and carry on the tough call to speak for God in the middle of injustice and political power games.

So Elisha says to Elijah at that final stop, "Make mine a double!" He asks for a double of portion of spirits! And not spirits in the form of "spirits", though he may have wanted a double shot to calm his nerves. He asks for a double portion of the

same spirit that has empowered Elijah, which at first read could sound arrogant and like a demand to be better than his mentor and surpass him every way.

But this is not the case. No, Elisha asks for a double portion because he's unsure he's got what it takes to fill Elijah's shoes.

Think about the times you've had to pick-up the mantle of someone else's legacy. Maybe your predecessor at work was a real go-getter; in my profession we refer to these people as the beloved former pastor. Fathers pass the mantle to sons. Mothers to daughters. Mentors to disciples. Initiators to initiates. Professors to students. Friends, all of us are carrying someone's mantle. Elisha was carrying Elijah's mantle, and reading between the lines, it's easy to imagine many of the ways Elijah influenced Elisha. What we see here is a relationship we might describe as mentoring. Not only did Elijah teach Elisha many things, but also and perhaps even more importantly, the two men shared life together. They walked together for several years before Elisha assumed Elijah's role as God's chief prophet. And I imagine during that time Elijah passed on to Elisha many of his values, principles, and desires for Israel's future. And because of that his legacy endures.

In the Jewish tradition there is what is called an ethical will. An ethical will is a way for people to leave a legacy. It's meant to pass on values and life lessons from one generation to the next.

An ethical will, unlike a legal will, doesn't mention monetary gifts or the distribution of assets. It's not about leaving one's valuables, it's about leaving one's values.

It's about lessons, blessings, joys, hopes for the future, love, forgiveness of others, and memories. It is about sharing and celebrating relationships -- usually across generations. And unlike a living will, an ethical will is more about how a person has lived rather than about how a person wishes to die.

Most importantly, an ethical will is not held privately, the contents revealed only after death. Instead, an ethical will is designed to be shared in a person's lifetime. I imagine much of what Elijah shared with Elisha was, in essence, his ethical will.

If you were to write an ethical will, what would you want to pass along? What is the legacy you wish to leave? Your legacy matters. The values you pass along

matter. In many ways they matter more than your valuables, because they'll survive more generations.

Friends, the example of Elijah reaffirms the need to invest our lives in those who will carry on after us. Elijah walked with Elisha and mentored him, and thus passed on his values and left a legacy that impacted not only Elisha, but future generations. When we offer to walk alongside another person that is a great gift for that person, to be sure. But it's also a gift to those who will benefit from the mentee's life and leadership. Think about your mentors, and how much you benefited from them and how that ripple effect has spread to others. What a gift they were to you and to others.

Friends, The values you pass along matter because chances are they'll survive more generations than your valuables.

But I also want to take care that a sign of a good mentor is the mentee taking what they've learn, and augmenting and adapting it for themselves. Elisha was not the same as Elijah, and his prophetic leadership was different than his mentor's. Influenced by him, certainly. But it wasn't the same. Part of being a good mentor is letting your mentee go, and giving them the space to live into your values, while making them their own.

A good friend of mine recently wrote about a ring her mother gave her. I have my friend's permission to tell her story. My friend's mother gave her a ring when she was in her late twenties.

Except she didn't.

She wanted her daughter, my friend, to have a ring. A nice piece of jewelry - something to admire, wear with delight, and perhaps pass on to someone later.

The mother's family didn't have any antique pieces, no heirloom jewelry, but she liked the idea.

So she went to a jewelers and she bought her daughter a ring. It was well made, had a nice diamond, was lovely. But she knew it wasn't a ring her daughter would choose. She gave it to her like this:

She said "I didn't want to give you a gift certificate to a jewelry store. I wanted to give you a piece of good jewelry, and I want you to go back to the store and have

them make you the ring you really want. I set it up with the jeweler. They know you'll be coming in."

So my friend went in and changed the gold to white gold, and the round diamond to an emerald cut garnet.

She wrote:

"When I look at the ring it is 'the ring my mother gave me', but she never wore it - nor women in our family before her - it is all mine. Made on the foundations she gave me.

I think of the wisdom in this and its parallel to the way she parented. Just as there were no heirlooms passed down to my mother, she was on her own when it came to raising solid humans. Especially a daughter.

She wanted me to have something she hadn't had; but she wanted me to be participant in it - so I would love it and recognize myself in it.

She also didn't want to phone it in. No voucher - no IOU.

She concluded:

Here's something I think has value; maybe your lens is different. What do you make of it? What can you make of it? That was her way.

Here are the raw materials. They're strong, solid, have the kind of value you can trade on if you get in a pinch, but you should put them together in the way that seems best to you. And you will love what you made; and my feelings will not be hurt that you didn't pick what I might've picked.

And I trust you to make those decisions. It will be lovely."

Friends, I hope you will reflect this week on the values you are passing on to others, for all of us are an Elijah to an Elisha. The values we pass along matter more than our valuables. But just like Elisha can't keep staring at the sky, neither can we. The sun can be blinding and the chariot of fire gets in our way. And so it is that we must trust our Elishas to take the values we've passed to them and make them their own. This is an essential part of life. And, it's an essential part of faith to let go and allow your Elisha to be the person God intends them to be.

Amen.

Sources:

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