

## THE MANTLE 2 Kings 2:1-14

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Transfiguration of the Lord, February 11, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 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. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." 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. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 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, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.*

*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." 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." 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. 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.*

*He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He 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.*

### I.

Thursday and Friday of this week, I had several back to back experiences which heightened my sense of what a mixed world we live in.

Thursday afternoon I received a call at home from a person whose family simply cannot catch a break, including most recently a frightening medical report. "I am so tired of being Job," the caller said. "I don't blame you," I responded.

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For several weeks we have been watching one of our neighbors nurse the marriage-length family dog nearer and nearer to his final days. On Thursday night, Maggie told me they had decided to put the dog to sleep; early Friday, she happened to see the children saying their final good-bye to the dog as they left for school.

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Later that day, I was working on the sermon in my office. My mobile phone rang and I recognized the number as belonging to my accountant in Iowa. I always send him my tax information early so his turnaround time is quick. When I answered the phone, I said: “How are you doing, Dave?” He responded: “A lot better than you.” When your accountant says that, you know the news isn’t good.

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I shut the sermon down, went home for lunch, stopped by Safeway. Walking into the store, I said to myself: “Larry, your higher than expected tax bill is nothing compared to a child losing the only pet they have ever known or a caller feeling like Job.” When I got into the store, I saw one of our older members who I knew had been holed up since Christmas. “Are you out of quarantine enough for me to give you a hug?” I said. “I’m so glad to be out,” she said. “I plan to be at the Dessert Auction Saturday night.”

I ran into a man who has been visiting our church, got to have a nice conversation with him, then was greeted by the cashier whose warmth leads me always to select her line if she is on duty.

I drove away thinking: “It’s a mixed world in which we live, sometimes filled with fear, sometimes filled with beauty.”

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One the way back to the church, I came upon a school bus going the opposite direction than I was headed. It came to a stop, its red stop sign coming out, its yellow crossbar following. I twiddled my fingers on the steering wheel. No one seemed to be getting out of the bus. I twiddled harder. Then a bearded young man crossed the street in front of me. The bus’s door opened, and I noticed a blue and white handicap sticker. After several more minutes, the young man emerged from the bus, assisting a young boy with Down Syndrome. They crossed in front of me, headed I assume to the boy’s home. My fingers stopped twiddling. I thought: “It is wonderful that a young man chooses a vocation where he helps children all day long, and it is wonderful to live in a country wealthy and caring enough to make such help a norm.”

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I have a distant connection with one of the people whose name has been in the news recently over sexual harassment. A few days after the news broke, I debated with myself but ultimately decided to send this person an email:

I’m sorry for what I am reading in the news [I said]. If you want to talk with anyone outside your immediate circle, I’d be glad to listen.

In Friday’s email, a response:

Your note, last week, meant the world. Thank you!

It is a mixed world in which we live. Decidedly mixed.

II.

Perhaps as much as any texts in scripture, the texts assigned by the lectionary for today’s service take us momentarily out of the world in which we live and transport us somewhere else.

In the Gospel lesson, which we did not read, Jesus takes Peter and James and John “to a high mountain apart, by themselves,” where they see him “transfigured...his clothes become dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” And there appear to these disciples apparitions of Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest figures in Israel’s history, talking with Jesus. Then Jesus leaves the mountain to face the opposition and conflict that will lead to his death.<sup>1</sup>

The Old Testament text paired with it – which we read earlier – depicts the last moments of the prophet Elijah walking the face of the earth with his understudy and successor Elisha.

The text says:

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. Elisha kept watching and crying out,

‘Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!’

But when [Elisha] could no longer see [Elijah], he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

[Elisha] picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He 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 [just as Elijah and Moses had parted waters before him<sup>2</sup>].

Like James and John and Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, Elisha sees a glimpse of the world to come even as he is called to duty in the mixed world in which he and we live.

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A scholar I read in seminary, who was nearing the end of his long career and whose daughter was a fellow student of mine, documents how the Elijah/Elisha stories have much in common with *mythology* from other cultures: chariots, fire, horses, riders, battles between gods and servants of those gods. Mithra, Hercules, Trajan – all bear resemblances to Elijah’s transport to heaven.<sup>3</sup> If you read both mythology and the Elijah/Elisha narratives, you may not on the surface see much difference.

Furthermore, our hard-nosed, scientifically trained, skeptical minds make it difficult to sort out what is real in the story, what is the product of the storytellers’ imaginative skill, and what is sheer superstition we no more believe than we believe in ghosts and goblins or witches and warlocks.

But the older I have gotten and the more I have read and taught scripture, the less concern I have for trying to determine what is real according to *our* definition of reality and what is fantasy as *we* define fantasy. If for no other reason, the definitions of reality and fantasy seem to have changed even in the short years you and I have resided on this earth, read its books, told its stories, sang its songs.

Real, imagined, or superstitious: there is something crucially important about this narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:2-9.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 14:1-31, specifically verse 16.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament Volume II* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 511-513.

At the time Elijah lived (in the Ninth Century) and the time in which his story was written (in the Sixth Century), the idea that someone would be spared death and transported to heaven in a whirlwind was new territory of belief for the people of the Old Testament. They had long believed that death was the definitive end, that Sheol was the underworld – “a hole in the ground into which every living person goes down” upon their death.<sup>4</sup> In the Old Testament, there had been only one other person about whom there had been any hint of life beyond this earth: Enoch, of whom it is said in the Book of Genesis: “He walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.”<sup>5</sup> Until Elijah, no major character seemed to have a life larger than this life, a life that extended beyond this one, better yet a life lifted up, in a chariot of fire, transported into the heavenly sphere. No one.

Yet when Elijah was transported to heaven, people began to think: “If [Elijah] went up into heaven and was not heard from again, it certainly seemed possible ... that he was still up there, waiting to be ordered back down to earth.”<sup>6</sup>

- This gave rise to the motif “Elijah the Immortal.”
- People began to believe – as expressed in Malachi – that Elijah would return in the final days, turn peoples’ hearts to one another, protect the Promised Land and the people of Israel from destruction.<sup>7</sup>
- They also believed that Elijah’s return would restore the ten lost tribes of Israel, stave off disaster, protect them from divine wrath.<sup>8</sup>
- At the time of Christ, Elijah was still eagerly awaited. When an itinerant preacher named John began to baptize people in the River Jordan, some wondered if Elijah had returned; and when he pointed to another itinerant as being one “the thongs of whose sandal” he was not “worthy to untie,”<sup>9</sup> some wondered if Jesus of Nazareth was Elijah returned.<sup>10</sup>
- Even today, the Jewish people keep an empty seat, a place at the Passover table, should Elijah return.

### III.

What is important for us is this: As over the centuries we humans have experienced the decidedly mixed character of the world as we know it, and in response, we began to yearn, to hope, to pray for, to believe in something more.

- We looked around and refuse to sing with Peggy Lee “Is that all there is, my friends, is that all there is?”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 737.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 5:24.

<sup>6</sup> James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 533.

<sup>7</sup> Malachi 4:5-6.

<sup>8</sup> Sirach 48:9-11, quoted in Kugel, 534.

<sup>9</sup> John 1:20-28.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark 8:27-28; 6:15; 9:11-13; 15:35-36.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, “Is That All There Is?” word © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., sung by Peggy Lee, available at

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- We refuse to believe with Qoheleth that “what has been is what will be; and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>12</sup>
- We refuse to say with Pilate: “What is truth?”<sup>13</sup>

We began to believe that there is something more, something greater than this life, something celestial, something above and beyond this mixed world in which we live.

Elijah the Immortal.

Jesus the Christ.

Bread.

Wine.

Body.

Blood.

Whenever I hear the story of Elijah,  
 Whenever I read the Transfiguration story,  
 These stories lead me,  
 Like Elisha,  
 To rend my clothes,  
 Pick up whatever mantle has been left behind for me,  
 Use it to part the waters,  
 Cross over  
 To the next side,  
 The next location,  
 The next duty,  
 The next opportunity.

The God who speaks to us through these stories,  
 The God these stories reveal,  
 Keeps us going  
 Through the decidedly mixed character of our world.

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9.

<sup>13</sup> John 18:38.