

And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel? (1Ki 18:17)

We have had occasion several times in sermons of late to reference and bring to remembrance this verse

“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” (Rom 15:4)

This passage always drives me back to the Old Testament to look at those “things that were written aforetime” to seek what new perspective and knowledge I can gain from them. In that vein I’ve been studying the life of Elisha, the miracles he performed and what we might learn from him. I hope over the course of several sermons to look at these miracles, how he lived, and how we can apply lessons from them to our lives.

The important point about looking at these historical figures and the thing to keep at the forefront of our studies is that they aren’t stories bearing academic interest. There is always application we can and should make to our lives today to be found within them. The events in the lives of these individuals are recorded explicitly for us to learn from, and we should be looking at them through that lens. So please take this as more than just a history lesson.

As a starting point, you have to look at the end of Elijah’s life to get an understanding of the relevant period of Elisha’s. Elisha is first mentioned in 1 Kings 19, after a very momentous series of events. Elijah had just slaughtered the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, then fled into the wilderness from the threats of Jezebel, where after a tremendous experience with the Lord and a little self-pity-party gets told by the Lord

“...Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.” (1Ki 19:15-17)

This is a very interesting series of orders regarding succession, including succession to his current role. It is not particularly unusual for a servant of God to be told to anoint a king, though this is remarkable in that two kings are named here for Elijah to set in motion their reigns.

The anointing of Elijah’s successor is a bit more unique. Make note that this succession isn’t something Elijah planned. It was directed by God. He was given not only instruction that he should name a prophet to take his place, but precisely who it was to be. We have no evidence that Elijah had before given any thought to the issue

of who was to succeed him; he makes no comment about it that is recorded, nor is it recorded that he ever asks the Lord about it. He has a lot to say about the state of preaching in his day, but never anything beyond the present state of things. It would appear from the recorded word Elijah had no concern for who might hold his office upon his death. I think that is an altogether appropriate approach.

Consider that in these days prophets were not entirely rare. Obadiah had hid one hundred prophets in caves to protect them from Jezebel's murderous wrath, and there are related stories of nameless prophets that just show up several times in Scripture to deal with some business of the Lord's and then they disappear from the landscape. In Samuel's time, prophets were numerous enough to have companies of them and for Samuel to stand as their leader

“And Saul sent messengers to take David: and when they saw the company of the prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as appointed over them, the Spirit of God was upon the messengers of Saul, and they also prophesied.” (1Sa 19:20)

It seems Elijah had similar association with what appear to be something closer to schools of prophets, called “the sons of the prophets”. Why they didn't figure in his reasoning that he was alone in the fight for truth isn't clear. Perhaps they were cowardly or weren't vocal until after the events on Mt. Carmel. Or perhaps his statements to the Lord were simply passionate hyperbole. They were around and seem to be familiar to him as we'll see in later events, however.

Elijah took to this business straightaway

“So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth: and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him. And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee. And he said unto him, Go back again: for what have I done to thee? And he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat. Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.” (1Ki 19:19-21)

There are a number of elements in this passage that I think bear individual attention, so we'll dig into these a bit:

❖ *So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat*

Elijah didn't wait around or continue his pleading with the Lord. He went about the business required of him without delay, I think because the Lord makes the final argument to Elijah that silences his complaints:

"Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him." (1Ki 19:18)

Elijah was pretty fired up for a long time at the Lord. But after the Lord lays this out, and rather gently puts him in his place, Elijah's wrath is properly put away, and he gets down to this new business of anointing.

He apparently didn't know Elisha, as their paths wouldn't have crossed naturally, so he went to find him. The Lord doesn't leave Elijah floundering, though, and gives him plenty of information on where to find him – *"Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room"*. Abelmeholah was in the inheritance of Issachar, toward the north of the Jordan river valley. This was clearly enough for Elijah to find him – the Lord supplies His servants with precisely what they need to accomplish His tasks.

Now, I'm not entirely sure why he dealt with Elisha first since he was the last mentioned. But I suspect it had to do with exposing Elisha to the events that occur between his anointing as a prophet in Israel and that of Elijah's departure from the scene of world events – but that is just speculation.

I think there is something of note in that Elijah doesn't send a servant or go grab any of the other prophets to help him run these tasks in parallel. He was given explicit responsibility for these anointings, and he was not going to delegate them.

- **When we figure out that there is a thing to do, it is our responsibility to go about doing it.**
- ❖ *Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth*

Here we see Elisha about his business, and where we begin to see the kind of person he is. His family is apparently wealthy, with fields expansive enough to require twelve yoke of oxen to plow them. I used to read this when I was younger and imagine Elisha behind twelve plows like some kind of Samson with the jawbone of an ass sort of thing. But what is actually described here is a well-oiled enterprise, with servants manning these plows and Elisha doing his part to help his parents conduct their business, taking the last yoke as his, forcing no preeminence or lordship over the rest of the teams.

This speaks to the humility of Elisha, and how his parents raised him. He is raised such that he is not troubled or ashamed to dirty his hands with menial labor. This is

similar to the state of the apostles when they are called, being found actively engaged in their work. I believe this is very consistent throughout Scripture. God does not call the idle to His service. He calls those who are engaged in doing what is needful.

- **No job should be beneath us, no matter what our station or situation is. When there is work to do, we must endeavor to do it. We should endeavor heartily to avoid idleness.**

❖ *and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him*

Elijah walks upon this scene not questioning the Lord. He doesn't know anything about the qualifications of this person or know what he was walking into. He walks in obedience and faith and does as instructed, casting his mantle upon Elisha.

This casting of his mantle is significant along at least two lines – first, Elijah made no hesitation to pass on to him the marker of his office; second, it was effectual on Elisha immediately.

Notice, Elijah didn't recruit Elisha to the service of the Lord; he didn't work to convince him of the value of the ministry or even really explain what was going on. He kept things very simple, knowing and understanding that if the Lord had called this young man to His service, there was nothing he, Elijah, was going to add to the conversation.

Elijah doesn't make a show of this passing on his mantle, either. It was a simple placing of the garment that indicated his service as a prophet upon the shoulders of Elisha. No fanfare, no proclamations or anything other than the laying of the mantel upon him in preparation of his taking on the role of prophet in Israel. Though these men had apparently never met before this incident, the mantle of office made it clear to Elisha who he was dealing with, and Elijah's demeanor likely drove it home.

- **What we are called to do is not about us and should never be made about us. Do the job, do it as simply as you can focused on the job itself not the result.**

❖ *And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee.*

This is a very effectual and immediate calling that Elisha experiences, despite the simplicity of Elijah's actions. He is drawn by the Lord into His ministerial service, a role he seemingly had no previous interest in, and undertakes to presently follow Elijah. This is a great spiritual event and speaks to the moving of the Spirit among His people. The Lord doesn't need flashy vestment ceremonies or loud, showy affairs.

“I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.” (Jer 17:10)

While Elisha’s answer is immediate, leaving the plowing right away, his response isn’t on its face completely committed. He absolutely recognizes the calling for what it is but succumbs to the flesh, seeking to go back to his family and say goodbye.

There are a lot of reactions and interpretations of this from different expositors, ranging from this being a display of his great loyalty and proper love for his parents, to disparagement of his lack of faith, referencing this interaction with Christ as evidence

“And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luk 9:57-62)

I’m not so sure that I agree with the idea that Elisha did something really wrong here, and I point to the fact Elijah doesn’t call him out on his reaction. If this was an inappropriate response, I believe he would have said something. Instead, I think this is Elisha considering the cost of his decision and putting it in its proper place.

This was an unexpected thing for Elisha, and it seems knee-jerk reaction was not his way. This definitely demonstrates for me how strong the pull of the flesh is, though. It is a strong thing, difficult to overcome, especially if not seen for what it is. Elisha needed a minute, perhaps, to consider the costs and insure he could willingly pay the price. He understood what that price was, and ultimately is willing to pay it, as we know.

- **When a call comes, be wary of the pull of the flesh, and heed the call with urgency and purpose. Don’t judge harshly those who cannot pay the price of that service.**

❖ *And he said unto him, Go back again: for what have I done to thee?*

Elijah’s answer is quite different than that of Christ’s, and there’s a reason for that. Elijah is delivering the message, not giving a command as the Master. While Elijah has authority granted to him, he is meek enough not to lay any claim to be able to command Elisha – “what have I done to thee” he says.

Elijah separates himself from the calling, as if to say “I’m not trying to make you do anything, I was just sent here to tell you a thing; I don’t have any authority over you, you’ve got to make your own choice to commit to God’s service.”

This is an important distinction, that of a servant delivering a message versus the Master calling directly. Think about the things Elijah has been dealing with and how easily that sense of power could go to his head. His prayers have stopped the rains and brought them again. He has recently wrought an amazing and visible victory for the Lord over idolatry and false religion. He could easily have been drunk on self-importance and an elevated sense of his worth, ordering Elisha to follow him immediately because the Lord has declared Elisha to be his successor. It’s clear that Elisha knows who Elijah is, and he treats him with respect – he asks, he doesn’t tell. Elijah doesn’t seek to influence the young man in the least, though.

You see the humility of Elijah here in how he addresses Elisha in this very serious matter. He makes no judgement on Elisha’s worth as a servant or God’s choosing of Him. He doesn’t make any inquiries into the history of the young man; there is no interview process. Elijah knows Christ has the sole discretion to declare fitness or unfitness for His service – that isn’t Elijah’s task. The King has the authority to appoint His ambassadors and messengers in the earth, and He sent Elijah to deliver the assignment, to anoint Elisha in his place, not to interrogate or validate his *bona fides*. Elijah fully submits to the delivery of the message and acquiesces to what the Lord has ordained, despite what it means for him personally.

Remember also, Elijah had some frustration over the lack of support he perceived was available to him in the field, as it were, saying twice to the Lord

“...I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” (1Ki 19:14)

“I, even I only am left”. Elijah took his job quite seriously and was quite angry he had no visible and apparent help. He had been engaged in very direct warfare against the enemies of God for years. In the flesh, it would have made sense for him to push back on the Lord when he told him to anoint this unknown person instead of one of the prophets that had been preserved by Obadiah, say. He could have complained that he’s anointing a replacement not an additional helper. But he didn’t. As the Lord’s currently anointed prophet in the earth, he stayed true to the mission he was given and delivered the message.

- **True ambassadors of Christ will do the job they’ve been given, whether it immediately makes sense, seems to fit with what they think is going on around them, or even displaces them as God’s voice in the earth.**

❖ *And he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat.*

I must confess I have always found this a bit odd, and it feeds the analysis that Elisha succumbed a little more to the flesh than maybe he ought. I look at this differently, that he is celebrating the decision he has made to commit his ways to the Lord. He is making a complete break from his past life, thus the use of the instruments of the oxen to cook the flesh. There's no going back to his old life and his old ways after this, and he wants that to be evident to everyone.

He celebrates because he sees this setting aside of his old life, even with its risks and dangers, as a great positive. He cheerfully enters into the service of the Lord, and much like Matthew at his calling, he wants to share the joy he feels over this change with the people around him. It is important to see here that he wasn't seeking this, and he doesn't view it as some bettering of his station in life. He knows what he is giving up. He knows he is now going to be consorting with a man wanted by the crown for treason and all the danger that entails. He knows he is likely walking away from any and all creature comforts. But despite this, he is overjoyed and feasts with his family because there is great joy in serving God.

Elisha puts that joy on display for all to see, to make it well known that he entered into this life of service of his own volition and that it was what he wanted to do. His loved ones seeing him thus engaged would likely be encouraged in their own service to God and it would comfort them to see him thus even as he departs.

- **It is good for the servants of God to be known to “rejoice evermore”. Though the business they are about is serious, it is not grim, and it should be apparent that the way they go in is good.**

❖ *Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.*

This is a volunteer army. That requires its members to take positive action to engage and serve. Thus, Elisha “arose and went after Elijah”. Notice that Elijah didn't hang around, lest he influence the young man in his answering the call. He was fully committed to God accomplishing what He intended, calling Elisha out to follow Elijah and replace him; he knew there was nothing he was going to do to influence the outcome, and he had more business to attend to, so he went.

Consider the significance of what Elisha has determined to do here – Elijah is a wanted man, a death sentence pronounced upon him by the most powerful woman in the kingdom

“Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time.” (1Ki 19:2)

Jezebel is still very much in play at this point, and to say the least, Elijah was not a popular person in Israel across the board. Elisha pays no heed to that, not allowing it to influence his decision. He rose up from the comforts of his home and family, surrounded by people who loved him and all the ways of his life that he was well settled in to go out to a way he had no knowledge of. Such a simple phrase, “then he arose”, with so much wrapped up in it. He gets up from his feasting leisure, leaves the table he had prepared and sets off after Elijah to catch up to him.

He didn't just follow after Elijah, pestering him about when does he get to be a prophet; he goes after him and “ministers unto him”. Another simple yet full phrase. Elijah didn't declare himself Elisha's master or call him to serve him. He anointed him prophet in his stead, yet Elisha ministers to him. It seems Elisha understood that he had much to learn about what it means to be a prophet of God, and the best way to learn those ways is to serve at the feet of one who is accomplished in them. Elijah obviously and certainly was that.

There is a great humility displayed here, not to expect some return for all he'd just given up and gain some great power in the world, but to run after Elijah and taking on as his new vocation ministering to God's prophet is a great show of Elisha's character. It demonstrates that Elisha didn't seek fame or glory for himself in taking this on. He genuinely sought to serve the Lord. His calling was effectual and fervent. He ran after Elijah to make it sure.

- **The life of God's ambassadors is one of service. Living to serve others first should be the primary driver that motivates them and stirs them to action, not personal gain, fame or glory.**

I intend, Lord willing, over the course of my next several sermons to continue examining the life of Elisha, focusing on the miracles he performed throughout his life and what it is we can learn from these historical events.

My goal is to demonstrate that there are indeed things to learn in these New Testament days from the events recorded by the Holy Ghost and encourage everyone not to look at these events just as history.

“Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Christ Jesus; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Heb 13:20)