

I think I might have an idea of Elisha’s experience of standing in the aftermath of that whirlwind. For me it happened not by the Jordan River but at First Congregational Church of Oakland, in Oakland, California. It was the day of my graduation from seminary, the day that symbolically and ritually marked the culmination of 3½ years of seminary: that is, 3½ years of engaging in intense theological education; 3½ years of experiencing surprising, gratifying, and challenging ministry work; 3½ years of forming and living with relationships and friendships that profoundly transformed me. I suppose it was a memorable day as any memorable day is. Excitement and joy electrified the air. And my fellow graduates' faces shined with amazing life and vitality as we immersed ourselves in the moment of celebration and let drift away, at least for a few hours, our worries and anxieties about job prospects, or lack thereof, moving details, and the inevitable goodbyes that would have to take place in the immediate days to follow. I think we're also all slightly dazed from the flash of cameras that seemed to pop up at every turn before the commencement ceremony. I guess you could think of it as the seminary version of paparazzi—friends and family stalking us to take pictures of their beloved ones in less-than-fashionable, shapeless black graduation gowns.

Certain moments of that ceremony run like short films in my mind’s eye, like the procession of us graduates down the aisle and into the sanctuary with the pews packed with a colorful sea of our family members and friends; or the moment when Rabbi Michael Lerner stepped to the lectern to deliver the commencement address; or the time I stood in line, awaiting my turn to walk across the chancel and receive my diploma and hood. These scenes run in my head like mini-movie clips, but the one that stands out—the one that reminds me of the whirlwind we hear about in today’s scripture—happened as the ceremony ended. With joyous music, we began to process out the sanctuary, and the procession began with the faculty members. It seemed to happen so quickly, the celebratory mood no doubt somehow bending the rules of time. The president of the seminary and professors quickly filed past us graduates, and we were to follow down the aisle and out the sanctuary. As I watched them walk past me, I realized this was probably the last time I would see all my professors and the seminary president together, in one place. The people who had given lectures that had turned my world upside down and preached sermons that stirred my heart and mind into action, the people who had sat with us students at meals in the dining hall and marched with us in the streets of San Francisco—these people were being carried away from us graduates—from me—in a whirlwind of graduation gowns and hoods, with the words of “We Are Marching in the Light of God” carrying them away down the aisle and out the doors of the church. As we

graduates soon joined the march down the aisle, I strained, walking on my tip-toes, hoping to catch one more glimpse of all of them together, that beloved group of people, those prophets and pastors who indeed walked daily in the light of God. We graduates were left behind in the wake of that whirlwind, left with diplomas in our hands and hoods around our necks, and both suddenly looking a bit like Elijah's mantle that had drifted to the ground after the whirlwind subsided.

I think I was experiencing a bit of an Elisha moment, like we read in today's text. Elijah, the mentor-extraordinaire, whom Elisha had doggedly followed through the hillside by the Jordan River, is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by a chariot and horses, all aglow in fire. (God must have had a generous travel budget allotted for Elijah, providing such exciting and extravagant travel accommodations.) And Elisha is left behind, perhaps standing on tip-toes, trying his best to keep his eyes on the airborne prophet and his fiery entourage as they climb higher across the sky. He's left in the wake of the whirlwind, left with Elijah's mantle lying empty on the ground, crumpled haphazardly and limply, its life and vibrancy and power suddenly whisked out of it. It's a moment Elisha knew would happen, that Elijah would be taken from him, as all the other prophets had whispered to him; but now that it had happened, what was he to do?

I think the answer to that question starts in looking backward before looking forward, that is, to wonder first, how did Elisha get to that place by the Jordan River? What led him to that place, and why? I must admit those same questions crossed my mind on graduation day as I processed out the church with my fellow classmates in the wake of the whirlwind that had carried away our beloved professors. How did I get to that place, to graduation from seminary? And why?

Elisha's story begins a few chapters back, near the end of the first book of Kings—today we read from the beginning of the second book. Back in I Kings, Elisha had found himself contentedly passing his time behind a plow and team of oxen, farming for his family. Then one day, the prophet Elijah shows up in the field where Elisha's working, and Elijah throws his mantle—his cloak—over Elisha. You see, a while back God had given Elijah a laundry list of things to do, including the appointment Elisha as the next prophet. So Elijah sought out Elisha and tossed his mantle over the young farmer, which symbolically represented the transfer of all things prophet-like—the responsibilities and authority and role and fashion—to the new young prophet-to-be. That mantle was ultimately a symbol of responsibility toward all God's people. Yet this whole scene is actually fraught with ambiguity and mixed emotions. Indeed, Elijah seems underwhelmed, almost nonchalant, by the whole thing while Elisha seems to over-respond. Again, Elijah has thrown his cloak over Elisha, and Elisha, understanding the import of this action, tells Elijah he wants to say a quick “goodbye” to his parents, and then he'll follow the prophet. But Elijah responds to this with a somewhat ambiguous question, “Go back again;

for what have I done to you?” Elijah seems to treat his actions like just another thing on his to-do list. But Elisha clearly sees the event as something momentous and so much so that he slaughters all the oxen in front of his plow (all 12 of them), uses the parts of his plow to get a blaze going for an impromptu barbeque, feeds a bunch of people, and then joins Elijah on the road, becoming his servant. Elisha takes seriously this sudden shift in career paths.

I have to wonder what of the prophet lifestyle attracted Elisha. What would make Elisha want to take on the responsibility of being a prophet of God to the people of Israel, including their corrupt king? It’s no cushy office job, that’s for sure. Yes, the work is rewarding, but it’s hard. Since becoming a prophet, Elijah has been on the road constantly, traveling from one city to the next, one mountain to the next, taking on the prophets of the rival god Baal, dodging death threats from Queen Jezebel, and enduring some pretty nasty weather on Mount Sinai. And God has Elijah on speed dial, always ready with another task, another assignment, for the prophet to take on—all of this for the cause of this God, YHWH, who loves the people of Israel too much to let them be seduced by Queen Jezebel and her Phoenician god Baal, who desires for the people of Israel to be out from under the oppression of nefarious and unjust kings like King Ahab. So Elisha wants to take on this kind of work for God?

Perhaps we might hear this same question asked of the church and its members today. What makes us take on the work of being God’s people? What draws us to come to worship together every week in a world that holds so many other options for our precious time? What draws us to sign up for a class through the Center for Spiritual Growth? Why do we pick up that extra can of tomato soup or tube of toothpaste while at the grocery store and then drop it in the food pantry box outside Waveland Hall? What draws us to march in the Pride Parade, boldly wearing a red Plymouth Church t-shirt, on a hot, humid summer Sunday afternoon when we could be sitting in our air-conditioned homes reading the Sunday paper? What makes us take on the work of being God’s people?

Elisha had no guarantees that he would become a prophet of God. After the whole mantle-throwing incident, the writers of Kings describes Elisha as a servant to Elijah, not yet a prophet. I suspect that’s why he follows Elijah so closely, as we heard about in today’s reading, why he repeats his oath over and over again when Elijah tries to get him to stay behind. “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” Elisha needs to follow his mentor closely, to figure out this whole prophet-as-a-way-of-living thing, and doing this all the while knowing that Elijah will be taken from him soon. The company of prophets—sort of like an ancient guild for prophets—this group doesn’t hesitate to remind Elisha of this fact as he and Elijah make stops along their travels. Once they’re finally alone, across the Jordan River after Elijah emulates the work of another great prophet—Moses,

after this, Elijah and Elisha have a conversation that proves just how serious Elisha is about becoming a prophet, about doing that work of God. Indeed, Elisha asks to receive a double share of Elijah's spirit, something a firstborn son would expect of his inheritance from his father—twice the amount any other offspring would receive. Elisha is serious. He refers to Elijah in this intimate, father-son relationship, even though they're not father and son.

The scene that follows is fantastic, vivid, with a chariot and horses on fire swooping between the two travelers, a whirlwind carrying the great prophet heavenward; and Elisha watches, not taking his eyes off Elijah, crying out loud, and finally tearing his clothes in grief when Elijah, the horses, and the chariot become a mere speck in the sky—gone from his vision but not from his heart.

Given all this drama, given all the suspense of this scene, given the fact that Elijah doesn't even directly guarantee that inheritance of the double spirit, what would make Elisha still want to pick up that mantle that has fallen to the ground and do the work of a prophet of God?

I think it's because he has seen something of God in Elijah, and it's been pretty incredible. God has been at work in the work of Elijah. It sounds simply. It sounds obvious, perhaps, but daunting, nonetheless. Not many people would willingly stand up to such outrageous biblical characters as King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, yet Elijah did so. From Elijah's interactions with that royal court to his ability to bring food and life to a widow and her son, God has worked through him. Yes, the work has been difficult, and yes, Elijah has had doubts about his work, but God has continued to show up, faithfully, time and time again, through the work of that one particular prophet...and God has continued to do so, to show up time and time again, faithfully, desiring to work through ordinary people, like a farmer named Elisha, like the person sitting next to you, like the person you see each time you look in a mirror.

What makes us take on the work of being God's people? Because we've seen God at work in others who have come before, in those who sit beside us. Something of God is at work in our work as people of God, as the church. We've seen it. We've experienced it. We have hope in it. We keep showing up because God keeps showing up.

God was faithful to Elijah, present through his work and life. God was faithful to Elisha, present with him, too, after the whirlwind. Elisha needed only to ask: "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" Elisha needed only to call upon God and then act—lifting the mantle, that symbol of responsibility toward all God's people.

We, too, need only to call upon God, and then to act, responding in love to the God who first loved us, responding to this world that so needs the justice and

compassion and peace that only God can provide. May we always find the strength and resolve, the courage and hope, to pick up that mantle just as Elisha did. Amen.