

Message: “Called to (spiritual) Freedom”¹

How confident is your faith? Good question to ask. In almost every movie or TV show, there is a character who seems to be uncertain or insecure in their own capabilities. Maybe the character is a dancer who is full of self-doubt or an office employee who can't seem to get the hang of things. At some point in the natural progression of the plot, this same person is usually transformed as they blossom into a new person, full of newly found confidence. If the plot follows ALL of the clichés, then those transformed individuals are empowered by key friends, family members, and colleagues along the way. We like this because we want art to reflect life.

In the best tradition of the theater, “Queue Elisha and Elijah.” God's Spirit inspired the ancient scribes to record the narrative of their relationships, so we might learn and be inspired in turn.

Elisha is dedicated to Elijah's prophetic ministry and doesn't want to see Elijah leave. So he stays with him, in the same way Ruth stayed with Naomi. There may be a lack of confidence, but there's also great devotion. Each passes a test of faith. So Elisha goes with Elijah on the journey to Bethel, even though Elijah advises him “stay here.” Elisha again follows Elijah - this time more boldly - as they journey to the Jordan, despite Elijah's command “stay here.”

What we're witnessing is a transformation. Elisha is moving from insecurity and uncertainty about his role and status toward a place of increasing confidence and assurance. What seems like initial clinginess morphs into a principled protest of Elijah's command to “stay here” (2 Kings 2:6). Even before the mantle is passed, Elisha is transforming into someone different. He's claiming the boldness of Elijah which he witnesses firsthand. Elisha is making it part of his own character, his toolkit.

They cross the Jordan together, and we reach a turning point in the plot. The increasingly confident Elisha is confronted with Elijah, who says, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I'm taken from you.”

¹ Material drawn from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/season-after-pentecost-part-1-worship-planning-series/third-sunday-after-pentecost-2019-year-c-planning-notes/third-sunday-after-pentecost-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>

I invite you to think back on a time in your life when you went through a transition. Perhaps the occasion was when you were the younger person and someone you loved and respected was leaving. Or maybe it was an occasion when you were leaving and you wanted to encourage and pass the baton onto another person.

Can you think back to how you felt and the questions you had at the time? These are the moments when God’s Spirit shapes our lives. There are powerful dynamics at play in these situations. Here, we see a well-known prophet (Elijah) and an “up-and-coming” prophet (Elisha). The one who has more social power is asking the one with less power, “What can I do for you?”

Many of us have been in a situation like this before. As pastors, our district superintendents ask a similar question when we’re appointed. That is happening across our denomination during this time of transition. As laity, maybe you met someone else “important” who, in trying to display their graciousness, asks if they can do anything for you.

I invite you to keep the moment in mind. When the individual posed the question to you, “What can I do for you?” or “How can I help?”, how long did you pause as you thought about what you would say? How many things were going through your mind as you were trying to figure out what is a good “ask” and what might be too much?

Now, let’s return to scripture and imagine what might have been going through Elisha’s head and how long it took him to respond before he boldly said, “*Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit*” (v9). The seemingly insecure Elisha we encountered just a few verses prior is now making the audacious “ask” for a double share of Elijah’s spirit. What boldness and confidence!

Who is this new Elisha and where did he come from? As we reflect together, we find there are two inheritances on display.

First is the inheritance of power. When Elijah was taken up into heaven, Elisha picked up Elijah’s mantle. He struck the waters of the Jordan with it, and the waters separated. This demonstrates God’s power through Elisha. Elisha taking ownership of the mantle symbolizes the transfer of power from prophet to prophet, person to person.

At the same time, there is an inheritance of empowerment. This happened explicitly through relationship and connection. Elijah empowered Elisha to claim more authority, not only with his words but by bringing Elisha alongside him. He’s mentoring the younger person, spiritually and practically. We witness a new boldness in Elisha as a “puts himself out there” asking for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit.

Elisha’s request could be seen as an over-reach. He’s too bold and overconfident. I think it’s helpful to put Elisha’s ask into context. Elisha asks for Elijah to share his blessing. As evidence, a short time later, when they are separated by the windstorm and the fiery chariot comes, and he sees Elijah depart, Elisha cries out, “*Oh, my father, my father!*” (v12).

Elisha isn’t related to Elijah by blood, but he is by the spirit. That’s how close and meaningful their relationship has become. The older person has helped the younger in their spiritual journey. And what a blessing that is. I hope each of you find the opportunity and occasion to do so. After all, we haven’t left yet. God still has work for you to do.

Back to the double share of Elijah’s spirit. Elisha isn’t asking for twice as much spirit as his mentor. When I said inheritance was on display, that’s meaningful. It’s easy for us to overlook the ancient customs of inheritance of assets. In the Jewish culture, the eldest child inherited a double portion, two-thirds of everything the parent owned (Deuteronomy 21:15–17). If there are no sons or male descendants, the daughters would inherit. Under current Israeli law, all children inherit equally. Elisha is asking to inherit Elijah’s faith and spiritual blessings.

The reason for this law of inheritance was to ensure the most valuable assets of the family stay with the tribe and the people, Israel. This was primarily an economic and social empowerment, but it works at other levels too, as Elijah and Elisha show us.

Elisha is asking to receive the inheritance a spiritual parent (Elijah) would pass to a child of the spirit (Elisha). The one who inherits will be empowered by God’s Spirit in life and in service to family, tribe and community. Elisha is claiming the closest relationship of all, that of a child to a parent. He’s ready to serve others. What a depth of faith.

Elijah gets it, but he kind of pops the balloon while, at the same time, offering a ray of hope. You see, Elijah isn't the one who found the spiritual blessing and made it his own to pass on as he sees fit. Elijah received the blessing from God. And he knows it. We've certainly seen how God took Elijah from the pit of despair and gave him a set of tasks to do before he passed on. And one of those tasks is encouraging and mentoring Elisha.

Elijah sets him straight: only God can empower Elisha with the spiritual blessing. And he gives him a cue. *“If you can see me when I'm taken from you, then it will be yours. If you don't see me, it won't happen”* (v10).

Elijah is taken. Elisha sees and cries out. And he picks up the mantle and demonstrates the miraculous power of God for the fifty prophets watching at a safe distance. Elisha takes up the authority, power and ministry of Elijah. Praise God!

This isn't just a story about the empowerment of clergy, though it certainly applies. All clergy are mentored and given power and authority through the Bishop and Elders. As lay members, you are empowered and given authority as well. We are blessed spiritually by God to be in relationship with God, with each other and with our neighbors, locally and around the world. We have a responsibility to use God's power to empower others.

This frees us from the things of the world Paul wrote about in his letter to the Galatians. We are given spiritual freedom to be more like Christ as we embrace the power of sanctifying grace. The Holy Spirit works to make us less bound by unhealthy, selfish desires so we can become freer and healthier in all aspects of our life, spiritually and practically.

We, too, are called to empower others through relationship, passing our blessings on. We won't always be successful, but we learn from failure. Taking risks is an important part of our spiritual growth. That's when the opportunity to be confident in faith transforms us, one moment at a time and one person at a time. As we have seen in the story of Elijah and Elisha, both power and empowerment are dynamic, risky and

weighty inheritances of God. They come with expectations, by God and by all of us. This leads to a final question.

How are we empowering others?

Let us pray ...

God our refuge, we are only truly present when we are in your presence. Empty us of ego, power and the need for status or fame. Empty us so we might be filled with the presence of your Spirit to see the hurts and needs in others so we might be present with them, trusting you are already present and inviting us deeper into your love. In Jesus' name, amen.

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 (CEB)

Now the Lord was going to take Elijah up to heaven in a windstorm, and Elijah and Elisha were leaving Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here, because the Lord has sent me to Bethel.”

But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives and as you live, I won’t leave you.” So they went down to Bethel.

Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here, because the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.”

But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives and as you live, I won’t leave you.” So both of them went on together. Fifty members from the group of prophets also went along, but they stood at a distance. Both Elijah and Elisha stood beside the Jordan River. Elijah then took his coat, rolled it up, and hit the water. Then the water was divided in two! Both of them crossed over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “What do you want me to do for you before I’m taken away from you?”

Elisha said, “Let me have twice your spirit.”

Elijah said, “You’ve made a difficult request. If you can see me when I’m taken from you, then it will be yours. If you don’t see me, it won’t happen.”

They were walking along, talking, when suddenly a fiery chariot and fiery horses appeared and separated the two of them. Then Elijah went to heaven in a windstorm.

Elisha was watching, and he cried out, “Oh, my father, my father! Israel’s chariots and its riders!” When he could no longer see him, Elisha took hold of his clothes and ripped them in two.

Then Elisha picked up the coat that had fallen from Elijah. He went back and stood beside the banks of the Jordan River. He took the coat that had fallen from Elijah and hit the water. He said, “Where is the Lord, Elijah’s God?” And when he hit the water, it divided in two! Then Elisha crossed over.

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 (CEB)

Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again.

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other!

I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law. The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. I warn you as I have already warned you, that those who do these kinds of things won't inherit God's kingdom.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit.