

Queer My Mantle and Give Me A Double

The Rev. Rob Shearer + AbbeyChurch + June 28, 2025 + Luke 9 and 1 and 2 Kings

Let us pray: *Let us be so bold, dear God, in these troubled times, to ask for a double portion of the very Spirit of Jesus this day – not for power-over, but so that all may live in peace and without fear. That all may live, as blessed Dorothy Day might remind us, in ‘world where it’s easier to be good’. All of this in Jesus name we pray, Amen.* [selah]

We’ve just heard two amazingly rich stories – one of ancient Hebrew prophets Elijah and Elisha; a story that is nearly 3000 years old... and another, of Jesus and his followers wandering the Judean and Samaritan countryside proclaiming that another world is possible – what they called the Kingdom of God – and *that* story is, itself, some 2000 years old.

It’s some wonder in itself that we can gather here and unpack these old, old stories told from generation to generation and even across cultures; stories preserved by being spoken around campfires in deserts - or whispered by communities huddling in places of fear or unrest amidst violence of empires – and somehow still hear that the very God who created all things might actually have something to say to us in these stories this afternoon.

The Hebrew Scripture we’ve just heard puts together passages from the books of first and second Kings; the story of prophet Elijah choosing a successor – where he passes of authority from himself to Elisha... and picking up some 6 or 7 years later – the story of the ascension of Elijah.

In the first part of that story, Elijah takes his prophetic garment, his ‘mantle’ and puts it over Elisha’s shoulders marking him as his successor as the next prophet of Israel. They then journey together for 6 or 7 years, and then we have this storied episode where Elijah is taken up in a whirlwind of fire and ascends into heaven. As Elisha prepares for the grief of Elijah’s departure, he asks for a ‘double portion’ of Elijah’s spirit, which is often read as a request to do twice of the wonder of what his mentor had.

There’s a part of me that loves these old Sunday-school worthy stories, rich in mythos and wonder and these grand characters, worthy of 1980s flannelgraph or 2025 AI tellings and retellings over and over again. Stories of ancient and tried authority rooted in the God of Israel, the very creator of the world. These are stories which have been told as a tool of liberation of the marginalized and oppressed – especially within the African-American tradition – *swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home*. And this is good use.

But even so, there are some things to watch out here – Jewish Rabbinic commentators call the stories of Elijah *troubling* – some even suggesting that the ascension of Elijah is God’s way of getting the often self-absorbed, overzealous and vengeful Elijah out of the picture - and even the later texts in Hebrew scripture (see Hos 1:4) condemn and seek to reverse the outcome of Elijah’s violent actions.

Elijah was, indeed, known for his bombastic violence – and just before where we pick up our telling of today’s story of the passing of the mantle, Elijah has called down fire, and then literally slaughtered 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah, at least by our standards today, is, well, hard to hold up as some beacon of divine goodness – for we have seen what an eye for

an eye does to the world, we have seen, and indeed are living through the fruits of vengeance being played out in wars between the nations.

And Elisha, his successor, sure, might be a bit better; his miracles indeed doubled those of Elijah, are often beautiful – drawing back to the older Mosaic prophetic tradition of care for the poor; he makes an undrinkable spring undrinkable, he brings relief from drought, he multiplies oil to pay off the debt of a widow, he even crosses over ethnic lines and resuscitates a Phoenician boy and helps a Syrian commander.

But Elisha, too, is an advocate and proponent of violence – and we, like the Rabbinic commentators, should find that troubling. Although Elisha's violence is never done directly by him – it's often by nature or animals – we read in these ancient texts how he denigrated Canaanite culture and even took perverse enjoyment in seeing a woman pushed out of a window, trampled by horses and eaten by dogs. In a more humorous, yet still perverse story, Elisha is bullied and called baldhead by some 42 youths and then takes revenge by calling on 2 female bears to maul them.

So, ancient stories of liberation and justice for one people, yes, but stories of ethnic cleansing and petty revenge too another – we shouldn't be too quick to have amnesia about the shadow sides of our flannelgraph heroes.

And yet, as we look toward pride next week, I'd suggest that today we might *queer* the text a little bit today – and see that, even with the messy and troubling violence and the worldview that accompanies it, there might be room for us to see what God is up to.

One queer theologian, [Rhianon Graybill](#) notes that when we read the story of Elijah and Elisha through the lens of the body there's an interesting progression from the notably hairy prophet of Elijah – a symbol of Samson or Esau-like masculine power - to the bald prophet Elisha often depicted as deficient in body. We also see Elisha involved in more traditionally feminine and what Graybill calls 'homosocial' ways of intimacy particularly in how he heals the 'other' – in how he touches the ethnic and gender other to heal – or even in having female bears maul the bully boys.

Is something, perhaps, beginning to shift or be revealed in the shift from Elijah to Elisha as we arc toward Jesus? Is, even in the messiness of these old stories, perhaps the very heart of God starting to be revealed anew?

In our gospel reading, we hear many of the echoes of the Hebrews scripture; hands on plows and columns of fire, crossing bodies of water - and the main figure preparing to ascend to heaven. And in today's story, Jesus and the disciples are traversing the very same ground, Samaria, where Elisha had lived and performed his miracles and where Elijah had smitten the prophets of Baal. *But something has changed, so it seems.*

In the section just before today's text, Jesus does not give his followers a mantle of authority or power, but, instead, tells them to take *nothing* for their prophetic journey – no staff, bag, bread or money and, no not even an extra tunic.

And so it is that they go, crossing over to the land of the Samaritans. Of course, as good Jews walking the same ground as Elijah and Elisha, the disciples would know their stories of liberation - of Elijah calling down fire and smiting the prophets of Baal. That's how we

treat the 'other', right? I mean, why not do the same for the Samaritans, who don't worship the right way and who have snubbed the Lord, himself?

But Jesus' response puts on an even queerer mantle, reflecting his earlier words to his disciples to wipe the dust from their feet when they are met with lack of welcome or opposition – and Jesus rebukes their desire to cast down fire, as if to say, look, the days of vengeance and violence are over. Yes, you have my authority and power, but use it for nonviolence. The reign of God is different – and is near.

I would suggest in this moment, as well as in where the story will take us from that point – that is, to a Roman Cross – is the very revealing of heart of God – not as a God of vengeance or retribution or power-over – not to call down fire, not to 'man up' or live into toxic masculinity, but to exercise radical letting go, to live into the Jesus Way of surrender and nonviolence. To even go so far as to journey with Jesus to Jerusalem toward the cross. And it is in Jesus' action of nonviolence and surrender that we, his followers, find our very salvation and liberation.

With that on our hearts, I wonder what it might mean to ask for and be given our 'double portion' of *Jesus'* spirit. These are stories of authority and power. And before he ascended, Jesus went so far to tell his followers: "one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." And so, I'd proclaim today that that this power is ours to use well – for if we don't take it – the forces of evil and violence and exclusion will.

It's this amazing idea that we are standing on the shoulders of giants, and that, at best, we have a calling that enables us to 'walk with the power of a thousand generations.'

And at a time where thousands daily are being rounded up and deported or kidnapped because of who they are – their national status or skin colour or political activity, where bombs are falling in revenge and whole people groups are being eradicated by war and starvation, where queer bodies, and especially trans folk are at risk, we, the followers of Jesus, the Lord of all creation, need to live into the soul power of love and nonviolence and follow him to the very cross of solidarity.

I don't know about you, but these are days when I look at the violence, the bleakest part of my heart wants to, like Elijah or the disciples of Jesus to call down fire from heaven on those men of power – on those who have power to harm others. How many ways do I de-humanize and demean and wish call down fire on my perceived enemies?

Being a prophet it hard work. It's lonely and it involves righteous anger. At the end of the day, I kind of like it that Elijah and Elisha and the disciples are troubling, broken prophets who often get it wrong. It's somehow comforting that as I read the news I have that same impulse of violence in my heart that they did.

But I love it that Jesus radically queers His mantle for, us, His followers – calling us into a place of non-attachment – in telling us to take nothing on our journey – non-attachment to stuff or outcome – to turn the other cheek, to wipe the dust from our feet. And even harder, not to smite or even demean – but, heck, to *love* our neighbours and enemies; and, yes, friend, that even and perhaps especially means our MAGA, or Maga Maple, homophobic and transphobic and racist neighbours. *[selah]*

I end today, then, with a thought about what it means to be a prophet. These old, old stories, of Elijah and Elisha and Jesus and his followers are about the loss of a mentor – disappearing to heaven. *Don't cling to me.* Jesus will tell his disciples before he ascends. *Know I am with you. I won't leave you alone.*

I love that the call to surrender extends even to letting go of who we think Jesus should be for us – and yet at the same time to know and trust that he's always there in his Spirit, even when it seems the forces of death and violence have the day.

And that's the word I leave us with – we will get it wrong, and even then, there is grace in that. God's power can transform even our broken stories and righteously angry hearts into salvation and freedom.

We *will* resort to violence and harm – but Jesus has done the work already; he's worn the mantle so we can walk lightly and freely without purse or extra cloak or guilt or shame. Like Elijah and Elisha and Jesus' followers throughout time we'll too often miss the point, sometimes do great harm.

But the call is still there to walk this Way of Jesus - to look to the example of the Lord of life, the prince of peace, the man of sorrows - and to journey with him in surrender and to love the world and realize that every single person is made in the very image of God almighty. *[selah]*

May these old, old stories told time and time again fill us with awe and open-handed wonder to live into this grace and knowledge, so that all may live and thrive in peace and in the assurance of God's love made known in Christ Jesus – even as today we ask for a double portion of His sweet, sweet Spirit.

Amen.