

“Onward and Upward”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
June 26, 2022 – Eighth Sunday of Easter
1 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Luke 9:51-62

Please pray with me: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen”
(William Sloane Coffin).

In our first reading from 2 Kings, we are told the story of the prophet Elijah passing on his mantle, which was a sleeveless robe signifying authority, to the younger prophet Elisha as he is separated from life by a chariot of fire and then taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. Perhaps you’ve never witnessed anything quite like a fiery chariot swinging low or have had a beloved mentor whisked away in a whirlwind, at least not literally, but you can probably relate to the part of the story in which the mentor passes on the mantle, as we’ve all had mentors, whether or not we’ve named them as such, who have passed on their mantles to us.

We’ve been blessed with parents, teachers, godparents, or others who have invested themselves in us, helped us to grow as people, and inspired us in some way to take up the mantle and do the same for others. I know that one of the reasons why I am here in this pulpit right now, wearing these cool threads, this mantle with puffy sleeves, is that I was inspired by the goodness and kindness of the pastor and youth pastor of the church I grew up in, both of whom helped me greatly as a person, and so I decided, even while I was still in high school, that I wanted to follow in their way of serving others, especially young people, as a pastor.

I imagine that young Elisha was similarly inspired to take up Elijah’s mantle and go into the prophet business, which was a *very* non-profit business, not to become wealthy, esteemed, or powerful, but because he himself was changed by Elijah’s ministry and wanted to continue Elijah’s life-changing, people-liberating work. Being a prophet of Israel was not a glamorous or cushy job; in fact, it was pretty low-paying and dangerous, but it was essentially important as the prophets spoke truth to the people and their leaders and called them to change, moving in the direction of God’s choosing, becoming more faithful in worshipping the God of

Love, and enacting justice, that the loving ways of God would become the ways of the people and their leaders.

The prophets followed the way of their greatest prophet Moses, who, in the central story of the Hebrew scriptures, stood up to Pharaoh, the emperor of Egypt, calling him to enact justice by setting the enslaved Children of Israel free. The prophets who followed Moses all took up his mantle and carried on his ways of speaking God's truth to the lofty and lowly alike, which is why the stories of the prophets echo the story of Moses, like today's story, in which the prophets part a body of water in two and cross through the middle of it on dry ground. And just as Moses was called to do the hard work of liberating the people by confronting Pharaoh and the prophet Elijah was called to continue the hard work by confronting Ahab and Jezebel, as we read in last week's scripture lesson, Elisha was called to carry on in their way of confronting evil and injustice in his time.

Here we are, many centuries later, gathered as a Pentecost people, filled with the same empowering Spirit as the prophets of old, and we are all called to carry on the same work of speaking God's truth to the people and their leaders and engaging in the struggle to set people free. We are all called to pick up the mantle of Elijah and Elisha and Moses.

We as a church picked up the mantle when we chose to be a congregation that is Open and Affirming, which is both descriptive and aspirational. Being Open and Affirming is descriptive as it is a statement of who we are, a people of extravagant welcome, but it is also aspirational as we seek to more perfectly live into this identity, do more genuinely and faithfully the work of welcoming all in our midst, and engage more boldly and steadfastly in the prophetic work of struggling for the enactment of justice for all people, no matter who they are, whom they love, or where they are on life's journey. As an Open and Affirming congregation, we pick up the mantle and struggle for the justice of equality to be realized for all of God's children, LGBTQIA+, straight, young, old, female, male, non-binary, of every background, and of every ability. Whenever the rights and the dignity of any people are under threat or are being stripped away, as they are, we are called and committed to engaging in the struggle to protect the dignity and rights of people, especially those who have less privilege and power, using every possible tool -- political, legal, and economic.

This is the work of the prophets we are called to take on. So let us put our hand to the plow and move forward! Just as Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, looking not to the right or the left, to all that would distract him from his prophet's work of setting us free, let us move forward together to where God has called us to go and do the work God has called us to do. And when we face the distraction of opposition, which we will *always* face when confronting injustice, let us keep calm and carry on, unafraid, in unbroken line. Let us not pray for fire to come down from heaven to consume those who oppose us or our way of being, but for the purifying fire of love to come and burn in our hearts and in the hearts of others. Let us have hope that by fearless acts of love the arc of the moral universe, as Martin Luther King said, will ultimately bend toward justice in our world.

This day, let us take up the mantle and go in love. Together, let us go, as my childhood pastor often said at the conclusion of a sermon, onward and upward. Onward and upward we go in welcoming love. Amen.