

II KINGS 2: 1-14 (p. 291)

JUNE 26, 2022

LUKE 9: 51-62 (p. 842)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Quicken our hearts Lord, as we search your Scriptures. Open our ears and awaken our minds. Stir up our spirits within us, so that we might boldly travel the paths you have laid out before us. And empower us to pass-on Truth, to those who come behind us. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

"PASSING THE TORCH"

I want to talk about Legacy today. You know, Passing the Torch to those who'll come behind us. I have been thinking about that a lot lately. I mean, how could I not! Five of our grandkids have been with us this week. And they are growing like weeds! What am I teaching them? Is it the right things? And there is a big Family Reunion just around the corner. People are flying in from all over the Country! What lessons should I share with them? I'm not getting any younger, you know. I just signed up for Medicare. Someone loving pointed out that my Mid-Life Crisis was decades ago! "Three Score and Five", they said! How can I not think about Legacy? Am I sharing values and morals with the next generation? What about insights, and hopefully wisdom? What about Truth?

Have you ever thought about that? How would you say we're doing? What's our role as a Parent or Grandparent? What responsibilities do we share as a Society, or as a Nation? How do we assure that the next generation will inherit a "Torch of Leadership", as opposed to a "Smoldering Branch of Dependency"? That they will proudly walk in the "Light of Truth", versus of an ever-lengthening "Shadow of Entitlement"?

More to the point, maybe. How are we doing as the Church? Are we teaching “The Things of God”, or simply “The Things of Man”?

I wonder if that’s what Elijah was feeling? I mean, he is a Man of Faith, right? A man with deep convictions. We talked about him a bit last week. Elijah was a Hebrew Prophet, if you recall, who accomplished amazing things for the Lord. But he was also a man who experienced fear, and even doubts. The Lord called him into action anyway, though, despite all that, called him to pass on Truth. And today, we find him at the very end of his earthly ministry.

Elijah is about to be taken up into Heaven in a Chariot of Fire, drawn by Horses of Fire! Can you imagine? And the Lord has told this ahead of time. We hear about a Whirlwind! We watch as Elijah is caught up into the sky! But prior to all that, we see Elijah training up the next generation, handing over the Reins of Leadership to his protégé Elisha, after equipping him to hold those reins, of course!

Elijah is a character! I’m sure that’s why I like him. He is a little obscure, living out in the wilderness, wearing a cloak, or outer robe, made out of animal hair! It’s reminiscent of John the Baptist, isn’t it, only six hundred years earlier! Elijah even secured his cloak with a leather belt, just like John! And this cloak, or in some translations “Mantle”, is actually a distinguishing mark of Prophets. Picture a Super Heroes’ Cape! Now picture Elijah removing his cape, rolling it up and striking the water of the Jordan River, causing it to part “to the right and to the left”, just like Moses did at the Red Sea.

That says a lot, doesn't it? And look back at 1 Kings 19:19-21 some time. It's the Call of Elisha as Elijah's Apprentice, a "Young Padawan", for you Star Wars fans. Elisha is out plowing a field, doing his regular job, with twelve-yoke of oxen. And Elijah, Superman, removes his Cape and places it on the shoulders of his Protégé. Elisha then smashes his plow, his only means of sustenance, sacrifices the oxen as an offering to God, and faithfully follows Elijah! Never once, "after putting his hand to the Prophet Plow", does Elisha look back at what used to be. But we'll talk about that more in a minute.

There is a lot going on here, isn't there! Including Elijah, and Elisha, having a conversation on inheritance! Elijah asks what he can do for Elisha before he is taken away. And Elisha answers, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit"! A "double portion, by-the-way, is the allotted share of the inheritance for the oldest son. And then we see Elisha, after Elijah is swept up into Heaven, picking up the Cape of Elijah, the Mantle of a Prophet, calling on the Name of the Lord, and doing exactly what Elijah did! He strikes the waters of the Jordan, and they divide "to the right and the left"!

And that's the way it works, isn't it? The Novice, or Apprentice, takes up the tools of the Mentor, or Journeyman, and does what the Mentor has taught them to do. It's Legacy! Passing on the Torch! So, back to the question. How are we doing with that?

There is a similar pattern unfolding in our Second Reading this morning. Maybe you noticed? This time Jesus is passing on the Torch of Responsibility, teaching the lessons to those who will follow Him.

He too is about to be taken up into Heaven. He too is about to end His earthly ministry. And He too knows this ahead of time. So, before He goes, Jesus wants to train His followers to carry on His work! Can you hear the echoes?

Come to think of it, there is another parallel here as well. Or maybe it's a reference? One of the first lessons that Jesus shares with us Protégés, is a warning: "Anyone who puts their hand to the plow, and then looks back, is not fit for the Kingdom of Heaven!" Make sure you heard that, because I think it's important! Anyone who takes their eyes off of their work, anyone who deviates from the intended path, the straight and narrow—anyone who wants to go their own way, plow as they see fit, instead of following the course that Jesus has laid out for them—does not deserve to be part of the family! That ought to get our attention!

I remember back in 2007, when we broke ground for this new Sanctuary. We used a single-bladed plow. It seemed fitting. It was snowing at the time, but we all took hold of the Plow Rope and pulled together! It was a powerful sign of our unity and commitment! If you weren't there, or don't remember, flip through the picture album in Fellowship Hall! It's 12-14 pages in, and a great image to keep in mind.

According to one historian, the First Century plow was a pretty finicky thing! "The very light Palestinian plough," he writes "is guided with one hand. This one hand, generally the left, must, at the same time, keep the plough upright, regulate its depth by pressure, and lift it over the rocks and stones in its path."

And he goes on. “The ploughman uses the other hand to drive the unruly oxen with a goad about two yards long and fitted with an iron spike. At the same time, he must continuously look between the hindquarters of the oxen, keeping the furrow in sight!” There is an image! “This primitive plow needed dexterity,” he writes, “and concentrated attention, because if the ploughman looked around, even for a moment, the new furrow would become quite crooked!”

That’s our lesson on “Legacy”, from Jesus, Elijah and Elisha! It takes dexterity, and concentrated attention, to make sure that the next row is as straight and true as the previous ones! It’s hard work, plowing for the next season. It’s difficult to make sure the new stalks will grow healthy and strong and straight! And it’s really tough to keep those furrows in line, every bit as true as the furrows before! But if you don’t do it, who will?

Mark Twain once said, “*Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.*” But Jesus said, I want you to follow the example of those who plowed before you. And I want you to make sure you set an example for those who will come behind!

We notice immediately, in today’s lesson, that Jesus’ time on earth is getting short. We are told that He now “resolutely focuses” His attention on Jerusalem, and the Cross that is waiting for Him there! Before He goes, though, He needs to pass on the Torch of Faith to His Disciples. He needs us to realize what being a Christian really means! Just look at what’s happening!

Jesus sends messengers up ahead, into Samaria. Samaria is the Northern Kingdom, if you recall. It's sometimes called Israel. And the folks there don't exactly like the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, where the city of Jerusalem is located. That's where Jesus is headed, by-the-way. Nor do those in the south particularly care for those in the north either! They are actually family, cousins. Only those in the north have done a lot of intermarrying over the years, with the dreaded Assyrian conquerors! So, now the north and the south don't see each other as the same!

Some pretty clear theological differences have developed as well, not to mention a major breakdown in communication! It's sort of like politics here in the United States! The furrows that these two Jewish nations have plowed, are now running in quite different directions! In fact, things are so tense between these two countries that most travelers from Galilee, in the far north, simply go around Samaria when they travel, even though it adds days to their journey! Of course, the Samaritans are going to reject Jesus and His Disciples! They are heading to the capital city of the enemy for Heaven's sake!

But maybe that's another lesson? Who said following Jesus was going to be easy? Where is it written that being a Disciple will always be smooth, or that sharing the Gospel will always be well-received? Popularity is not a contest that true believers can expect to win! In fact, I'm surprised these "messengers" were not run out of town on a rail! Maybe, the lesson, is that carrying Jesus' Torch will be demanding! It was for Him! And it was for His Disciples! So, maybe we should expect it to be for us as well! That is, if we are plowing straight furrows, true to the first one!

Part of our Christian Legacy may well include rejection and persecution, maybe even from family members! Following Jesus will not guarantee a warm welcome! In fact, it may just be the opposite! But no matter what, as we see here today, we cannot respond in anger! Calling down fire from heaven on those who reject you, is not an option for true followers! Instead, just move on, we are told! Shake the dust off of your feet, and go share the Good News with someone else!

There is a second lesson here for would-be followers as well. A man approaches the Lord and boldly states that he will follow Jesus wherever he goes! He is willing to pull up stakes, he says, jump on the bandwagon, and head out wherever God calls. It sounds familiar! But Jesus informs him that there are not a lot of creature comforts on the Journey of Faith. There are no Ritz-Carlton Hotels, with Jacuzzis in every room, no air-conditioned limousines, maybe not even a place to lay your head at night! On this path that follows the Son of God, uncertainties are going to creep up along the way! So, you might just as well accept that now!

Then Jesus invites another man to help Carry the Torch. But this guy has an excuse: “Just let me go home and bury my father first.” After that, I’ll do whatever you ask me to do! Give me a little more time, Lord, which may sound familiar too! And at first brush, it may seem like a reasonable request! In those days, tradition held that a son’s responsibilities to his father’s household ended at his father death. So, what’s wrong with this man going home and finalizing the funeral arrangements, burying his dad, you know, settling the estate?

Jesus does seem a little unreasonable here, doesn't He? Why give the response that He does? Unless of course, the father isn't dead! What if this guy is just looking for a way out! We might be able to relate to that too. What if he is saying that he wants to wait a few more years, until his father actually dies? Then, if he still senses God's Call at that time, he'll step up and faithfully follow! Not right now, though! I've got things to do. Wait until my father dies. Let me think about this for a while, process it, and I'll get back to you! To which Jesus points out that even life's primary responsibilities, family and such, shift to secondary responsibilities, when set against true Discipleship!

The last example that Luke shares, or the last excuse if you will, comes from a man who wants to go home and say goodbye to his family before he sets out to follow the Lord. Again, at first, Jesus seems unreasonable. What's wrong with stopping by the house on your way out of town to kiss your mom and dad goodbye? Would it be wrong to want to grab a second pair of sandals for the journey, or maybe even your favorite walking stick?

But what if that's not actually what he is saying? What if he too is just trying to find a way out? What if he is hoping that Jesus will simply leave town while he is gone, without him? Or what if he is hoping his parents will tell him "No, you can't go"? It wouldn't be his fault then, would it! What if he too is looking for an excuse! Doesn't Jesus' reply make that scenario quite likely? "Anyone who puts their hand to the plow, and then looks back, is not fit for the kingdom of heaven!" If you are going to follow me, says the Lord, then I take precedence over everything else! No one, or nothing, can come before me!

That's the Call to true Discipleship! It's immediate, and whole-heartedly complete, permanent and forever! It's like Elisha smashing his plow and sacrificing his oxen. There is no going back!

Which brings us too today, doesn't it? What excuses do we employ? How is it that we try to weasel out of following the straight and narrow path of Discipleship? Do you worry about what the Samaritans will think—that your beliefs might be different from theirs? Will their choices of boundary markers cause you to deviate from the road? Will the lack of creature comforts along the way stop you dead in our tracks? Or will your perceived responsibilities at home get in the way? You know, your so-called duty, or desires? What is keeping you from following what is truly important? Just as significant, or more so maybe! What tricks does Satan use to stop you from passing on the Legacy of your Faith, from handing on the Torch you carry, from plowing that next row straight and true? What's your Legacy?

You know, my “go to” movie on the subject, has always been Mr. Holland's Opus. I watched it again the other day on the Disney Channel. Richard Dreyfuss plays a frustrated composer who takes a “temporary” job as a High School Band Director, until he can fulfill his lifetime goal of “Fame, as a Classical Musician”. At first, he is determined to compose his Opus, his grand symphony. He works at it every day, even after putting in a long day with his students. But then, as family demands increase, and the pressures of his job multiply, Mr. Holland recognizes that his dream of leaving a lasting musical legacy, is merely a dream!

At the end of the movie, we find an older, Mr. Holland fighting in vain to keep his job. The School Board has decided to reduce the Operating Budget by cutting the music and drama programs. And Mr. Holland, no longer a reluctant Band Teacher, passionately defends the role of the Arts in public education. What began as a career detour, has now become a thirty-five-year mission, pouring his heart into the lives of young people.

A few days after school has let out for summer vacation, Mr. Holland returns to his classroom to retrieve his belongings. He has taught his final class. With regret and sorrow, he fills a box with artifacts that represent the tools of his trade, memories of many meaningful classes. His wife and son arrive to give him a hand. But as they leave the room, and walk down the hall, Mr. Holland hears some noise in the auditorium. Because school is out, he opens the door to see what the commotion is all about. And to his amazement he sees a capacity audience of former students and teaching colleagues, and a banner that reads “Good-bye Mr. Holland”!

Those in attendance greet Mr. Holland with a standing ovation, while a band, consisting of past and present members, plays songs they learned at his hand. His wife, who was in on the surprise reception, approaches the podium and makes small talk until the master of ceremonies—the governor of Oregon—arrives, who is none other than a former student, who Mr. Holland helped to believe in herself his first year of teaching!

As she addresses the crowd of well-wishers, she speaks for the hundreds who fill the auditorium: “Mr. Holland had a profound influence in my life—on a lot of lives, I know. And yet, I get the feeling that he considers a great part of his life misspent. Rumor has it he was always working on this symphony of his, and this was going to make him famous or rich, or probably both. But Mr. Holland isn’t rich, and he isn’t famous—at least not outside our little town. So, it might be easy for him to think himself a failure. But he’d be wrong! I think he’s achieved a success far beyond riches and fame.”

Looking at her former teacher, the governor gestures with a sweeping hand and continues; “Look around you. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each one of us is a better person because of you! We are your symphony, Mr. Holland. We are the melodies, and the notes of your Opus! We are the music of your life!”

So, let’s be clear! Each one of us has been handed the Torch of Faith, given the Reins of Truth, if you will! And right now, we are plowing furrows, whether we realize it or not! And one day, we will hand those reins on to those who come behind us! So, in what direction do you think those furrows should go? What will our Legacy be? What will your Legacy be? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We are refreshed, Lord, by our time spent in your Holy Presence. We are nourished by your Fountain of Grace, and fed by the Bread of Life, your Son. And for these things, Father, we give you our heart-felt thanks.

Lord, we have come together this morning to praise you and worship you. We are not here for us, but for you. We have come together as a family, as One Body, as your Church. We have come together as Chosen People, into this Community of Faith, and before your Altar of Compassion. And we come bringing our pleas and petitions, our joys and concerns. And so, together Lord, in your Holy Presence, we bow, humbly and meek.

Father, we know that as the Author of Life, you have a design for each one of us to follow. Please soften our hearts now to accept your will. Please guide our spirits in the directions that you would have us take. And please empower us, and encourage us Lord, so that we might fulfill your design and your plan. And then, after we do, to rest in your arms when our work is complete.

We trust in your strength Lord, and in your power. And because of this trust, because of our faith in you, we place into your hands our fears and our problems. We also celebrate with you all of our joys! And today, Lord, we lift up before you..... We ask for your protection, and your guidance, and your healing touch, in each of these lives.

We also lift up your Church Lord—in all of its many forms throughout the world, in all of the congregations, and all of the Denominations, and all of its manifestations. And we ask you to Bless your people Lord, and make us into a Great Kingdom, one that bows at your Name, and honors you with all that we do! And we ask these things Father, in Jesus' Name. And pray now in the way that He taught us saying, Our Father...