

“They Will Be Missed”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Based on the book *We Make the Road by Walking* by Brian D. McLaren, Chapter
12

Texts: 2 Kings 2: 1-15 and Acts 1: 1-11

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Perhaps those words are familiar to you. They are by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his last, and most apocalyptic sermon. He delivered it on the eve of his assassination, at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968. The next day, the world wondered what would happen to the movement he began and for which he was the most prominent of the leaders. What happens when a leader leaves, dies, or otherwise cannot complete the mission they began? (from “I Have Seen the Promised Land” by Dr. Martin Luther King, as printed in *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr* Edited by James M. Washington pp279 ff).

Those are the questions raised by the two stories we read in our scripture lessons this morning. In the first, it is the prophet Elijah, perhaps the greatest prophet of them all, is taken up in a whirlwind never to be seen again. His young protégé, Elisha, is now left with the mantle of the movement. What will happen next? Will the legacy of the great prophets' end with Elijah's passing? Or can Elisha take up that mantle on God's behalf and continue the mission at hand?

It's no different when Jesus is taken up in the ascension. The disciples are caught looking up at the sky as if expecting Jesus to come back down. But the truth is that now the mission is theirs. Jesus won't be walking the road anymore. Now it's up to the disciples, especially Peter, to make his own road by walking. It's up to him now to accept the mantle of the movement. Will the legacy of Jesus and Christianity end there? Or can Peter take up the mantle on God's behalf and continue the mission in the world?

No matter who you are or where you come from, you have lost great leaders. Sometimes they are faith leaders of great stature, or a matriarch or patriarch in your family, or a life-changing teacher, a mentor, a parent...whether through death or moving on to a new location, leaders don't always stay around. In such a situation the question always becomes, "who will take up the mantle from here?"

In the same speech I quoted above from Dr. King, he made a couple other comments that I thought relevant to this discussion. He tells the crowd at the church in Memphis, “I’m delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow. Something is happening in Memphis, something is happening in our world.” Little did the listeners realize that would be up to them, beginning the next day, when King would be assassinated. He could no longer lead them. It was going to be up to them now.

Those can be frightening times. In any organization or institution, there are those people who become the sages, the mentors, the guides, the leaders. They may never hold elected office, or be the “face” of the organization, although sometimes they are. In any case, we all know people who take this special role in our lives and in our institutions. We worry when one passes. Mardee Storing was one of those people in this congregation, so was Don Crandall, and there have been many others, but thankfully there have been people like you who have stepped in, stepped up, and stepped out to fill the voids that they leave. But still we wonder, can we, do it?

Elisha was full of questions, but even more so full of determination. In a commentary I read on this passage (*First and Second Kings, Interpretation Bible*

Series, by Nelson), the author tells us that the prophet Elijah wasn't a great mentor. In fact, he tried to shake Elisha while on their great journey. It was Elisha's determination that ended up giving him this role in filling Elijah's shoes. Elijah's unfinished mission now rests on Elisha. He knew a lot, but he still had much to learn. And his mentor, such that he was, was no longer in the picture. The point here is that Elisha grew into leadership and took up the mantle of Elijah's mission.

The Apostle Peter was much the same, as he bumbled and fumbled his way following Jesus, making all kinds of mistakes, and being a rock one minute and Satan the next, in Jesus' own words. And now, with Jesus ascending, Peter needed to grow into leadership, as did the other disciples, the same ones Jesus found in a locked room filled with fear after the resurrection. God never picks the perfect, or the completely well-prepared to lead and fulfill God's plans in this world. So many times, we think ourselves unable, unprepared, and unskilled to assume the mantle of God's work. We seem to believe that only certain, special people can be on the forefront of God's mission. Sometimes this means that the mission of the organization or the movement dies with the great leader.

The church, in all its forms, is struggling with these issues. What will happen when so-and-so dies? What if they move? What if they retire? What if they leave

us for another place? What will we do? Like the disciples at the ascension, sometimes we find ourselves looking to the last place we saw the beloved leader hoping he or she will return and take their rightful place. Then we can get back to following their lead, leaving the responsibility and the calling to those we decide are “better suited.”

“But the truth is God does not call the qualified but qualifies the called.” I’m sure you’ve heard that quote before. I’m just not sure how many people believe it. Our Bible is chock full of stories of unqualified world changers. Heroes that before they followed God’s call in their lives, just lived as ordinary people. Moses had a speech impediment. Jacob had to wrestle with God and come to terms with his own fallibility and misdeeds. King David had to overcome his youth, and his being seen as the most unlikely to be called by God. Even the virgin Mary was just an ordinary teenager before God called her to do the extraordinary. What will it take before we believe that God calls ordinary people like you and like me to do God’s business in this world? We marvel at the great leaders, but we shudder in fear at the idea we could be one too.

A favorite hymn on All Saints Day, *“I Sing a Song of the Saints of God”* says plainly that “They lived not only in ages past, there are hundreds of thousands still”

when it comes to saints. And even the chorus, “And I wish to be one, too.” We sing it, but I’m not sure we believe it. When the great leader leaves or dies, we just see darkness, loss, sadness, and sometimes we even lose our purpose. Yet, Dr. King told us in his sermon *I Have Seen the Promised Land* that “...I know, somehow, that only when it’s dark enough can you see the stars.” Friends, some could say that we live in a dark time, fraught with division and strife, sadness, and suffering, hate and hurt, and that we don’t have the leaders we need to get us out of this mess. I say that is flat wrong. We have everything we need. We always have. And it comes from God who always finds the ones who are needed for such a time as this. That is what makes our Bible so full of hope.

Story after story in both Testaments tell of a people who wandered, fought, died, lied, cheated, manipulated, prostituted, and every other misdeed, and yet they found not only their way to the promised land, but through many a crisis after that. We, too, have lived through crisis after crisis and somehow, we have made our way here. The question now becomes, “What is ours to do?” each of us, in this church, in this community, and in this world to create what we pray for every Sunday, “Thy Kingdom come. Thy Will be Done.” We don’t wait on God because God is already out ahead of us. We don’t wait to be called because we have been since the day we were born. We don’t need to wait for the perfect time to move

ahead, or when we get it, all figured out, or when we are without blemish. It's unlikely those things will come to pass. For God chooses whom God chooses, and I'm convinced that each of us are chosen in ways we cannot imagine.

It doesn't matter if we're the next Elisha, or Peter, or Dr. King, it does matter that we see ourselves as called, claimed, sent, commissioned, whatever it is we need to hear, to conduct God's mission, taking up the mantle of those who have come before us. Our best days are never behind us. For each day is a day in which we can carry out our calling. We may do it differently. Maybe we do it more quietly. Maybe we are out front. Maybe we are the ones who support the leader. In any case, we are needed, each of us, in this great mission we call discipleship. The Spirit of Christ rests not only on those first disciples, but on us all. Receive the Spirit, and may it embolden you to do something you never imagined.

To complete this mission, we must do what those before us had to do as well, "we must stay focused on the substance at the center." In the case of those who call themselves Christian, this is Jesus of Nazareth, in whose name we serve. May God be glorified in all we say and do in God's name.

Amen and amen.