

Preacher: Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-15

It was 1982 in Los Angeles California when a man by the name of Larry Walters bought 45 weather balloons from an Army-Navy surplus store, tied them to a lawn chair and filled the balloons with helium. With some sandwiches, beer and a pellet gun, he strapped himself into his lawn chair thinking he would float lazily up to 30 feet in the air over LA. Instead, he cannoned up into the air, finally leveling off at 16,000 ft. Too afraid to shoot down balloons at that height he drifted in the air, freezing cold, for more than 14 hours, eventually catching the notice of air control at LAX airport. Eventually, he gathered enough courage to shoot down a few balloons and slowly descended. As he came to the ground, he got caught in a power line, blacking out a Long Beach neighborhood for 20 minutes. Waiting LAPD arrested him when he climbed down to safety. A reporter on the scene to cover the story asked why Larry did what he did, to which Larry replied, "A man can't just sit around."¹

Today, we focus on the story of Elijah's ascent into heaven, not, as it were, in a lawn chair carried by weather balloons but with a chariot of fire and whirlwind. Elijah is one of two men named in Hebrew scripture who is taken up into heaven without dying; the other was Enoch. Elijah was a man who also didn't just sit around but who moved about Israel, calling the people to a single-minded devotion to the one true God.

Elijah is a significant prophet in both scripture and in Jewish Midrash (or rabbinical commentary on scripture). Elijah was not only significant in his own time, but he continued to be considered important as the one who would return before the Messiah. He did, indeed, appear at the transfiguration of Jesus alongside Moses, signaling that death isn't the end.

Elijah is a complex prophet, strong in his prophetic voice calling Israel back to faithful worship of God. However, he was not always so bold a prophet. After defeating the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, he ran for his life from the blood-thirsty Jezebel. In the wilderness, he prayed to God that he might die saying: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Instead the Lord revived him and encouraged him, and he was able to continue to minister in Israel. Sometimes, having a prophetic voice to share will lead one to want to run and hide in fear.

When Elijah encountered God on the mountain in a still small voice, God commanded Elijah to appoint Elisha as a successor. When the day came for Elijah to be taken into heaven, Elijah gave Elisha three opportunities to stay behind, probably to test his resolve to follow in the footsteps of his mentor. Each time, he continued along with Elijah saying, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."

Once they crossed the Jordan, Elijah asked Elisha what he could do for him before he left, and Elisha asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit. Elisha had proven himself as willing to take up his mentor's work and when Elijah was taken up to heaven Elisha literally picked up his mentor's mantle ready to carry on his good work. The scripture confirms Elisha as a legitimate successor because he saw Elijah taken up into heaven and because the last miracle of Elijah was also the first miracle of Elisha - parting the Jordan river. His wish to carry on his mentor's work was be granted.

When Elijah asked what he wanted, Elisha didn't request fame or fortune, wealth or health, but the ability to move God's agenda forward in the spirit of Elijah, in the essence of

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Elijah. What a way to honor Elijah and the investment he had made in Elisha — to carry on the mantle of the one who had gone before him.

Most of us who have come to faith do so because of the mentoring of others who have gone before us. We can probably each name a handful of people who were essential in our formative years, shaping and calling out our faith. There is probably no greater reward a person can receive in this life than the knowledge that he or she has made a difference in someone else's life. I hope you have had or will take the opportunity to tell your mentors how they have shaped your faith.

Today in particular, we honor and remember those who have gone before us. We do this close to All Saints Day because we recognize in the Protestant church that you don't need to be officially venerated to have made an impact on the lives around you. Despite the fact that some Christians in America have protested the pagan celebration of "Halloween," its name is actually derived from All Hallows Eve, the night before All Saints' Day — a day to honor Christian saints and martyrs.²

Today, we also finish the first eight weeks of our Bible Read-through having read through the covenant history present in Genesis through Kings. We have learned through this reading of people like Moses, David, Ruth and Elijah. These respected and celebrated people of faith were simply humans who were able to, on occasion, do great things empowered by God. They were not pure and holy all the time, but they were made extraordinary by God's hand. Their actions, at times, even seemed to go against God's will and wishes, yet God was able to use them to bring about a greater purpose. These are saints that we can better resonate with knowing that no human is without sin.

Wendy Beckett writes: "When I was young, I longed to be a saint. What was I longing for? I think it was for certainty that my life had been, in the most profound sense, a "success" — that great and glorious success that is sanctity. We revere the saints. We imitate them. Theirs is the true and lasting glory. Very clearly, this desire is, unconsciously, as worldly as that of the writer who wants to write a masterpiece or the politician who yearns to be prime minister or president."

While there is a little bit of vanity in this desire to have lasting glory, there is something important in living our lives in such a way that our work outlives us because we have invested in others. Our good works have value only if we can pass them on to others, extending an impact into future generations. So today we remember and honor those who have made an impact on our lives and hope to continue their good work — to take up their mantle.

When Elijah was taken up into heaven, Elisha mourned and cried out, tearing his clothes in two pieces. Likewise, we mourn and cry out when we lose loved ones. But at some point, when ready, we can, even while continuing to stare and point into the heavens with wonder, ask for a double portion of their spirit and carry on. Elisha, having witnessed the resurrection power of Elijah's heavenly flight, continued on with boldness and the perseverance of his spiritual ancestor and mentor. We too have witnessed resurrection power in Jesus Christ. So, we too can carry on with boldness and perseverance even through teary eyes, knowing that there is a promise and hope that goes beyond our current reality.

Elijah is considered a savior to communities of Jews even today. This is partly because Elijah was a biblical hero, calling down miracles from the sky and intimate enough with God that he never died. He was an intercessor who would plead the cause of his people and call them to greater faithfulness. To this day, the Jews continue to venerate him at every meal, at the end of

² homelitics.com

Nov. 4, 2018 - Elijah's Successor

every Sabbath, at circumcisions, and, most famously at Passover Seders where a seat is set for him at the table. Elisha knew that his mentor was significant and honored him by continuing his work. May we too honor those we remember today by continuing to carry on and share the gospel. Maybe, similar to Larry Walters, we must be people who don't just sit around but who pick up the mantle of those who came before and carry on. May the good news of resurrection bring you peace and boldness today and always. Amen.