

June 26, 2016
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Laura Blazek

Today's story of the passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha as Elijah is carried off in a chariot of fire, is a timely one for our parish, since this is Fr. Tom's last Sunday with us. I was tempted to attach flames to both sides of his car before he heads off to Texas, which I've heard some people refer to as heaven on earth, but I resisted the urge and got him this (show Hot Wheels car with painted flames) instead.

Our story finds Elijah and Elisha standing on the banks of the Jordan as a crowd looks on when a flaming chariot whisks Elijah away with everything except his mantle which he passes to Elisha. In this story the mantle that is passed has two different meanings. First, it is an outer cloak that helps to provide warmth like a blanket. Secondly, it is an important role or responsibility that is passed from one person to another. Elisha physically picks up the cloak left by Elijah and strikes the water with it before placing it upon his shoulders. When the waters part for Elisha we see that Elijah's spiritual authority was passed on to Elisha. One spiritual leader left, passing his responsibilities to another. This is exactly where St. Michael's finds itself today- one priest is leaving, soon to be replaced by another.

Fr. Tom is like Elijah, standing on the banks of the Jordan knowing that he will soon be leaving the people he has served for so long. Both of them face leaving what they know for an unknown world filled with new challenges and possibilities. Many of us may have experienced a similar situation of leaving all that we know- going off to college, getting married, moving to a new town, leaving an old job for a new one. At that moment of leaving, a myriad of emotions and thoughts begin to churn- excitement and joy mixed with sadness and nervous jitters. Saying good-bye is never easy for either party.

Somewhere out there is Elisha, the new priest that will take up the mantle that Fr. Tom leaves behind. As he or she picks it up and puts it on it, I imagine Elisha turning to face the crowd of people that just saw their spiritual leader whisked away and realizing that he is now responsible for them. Elisha is essentially facing a crowd of strangers. While they have been together for a while, Elisha has always been in the background, probably never really acknowledged much, as all attention was focused on his master Elijah. The crowd really doesn't know Elisha as anything more than a tag-a-long.

Like Elijah, Elisha also must have had a myriad of emotions flowing through him as he not only had to say good-bye to someone he loved and leaned upon but now he has to take care of all those left behind. Saying "hello" is often just as hard as saying "goodbye".

Elisha is now in charge and faces the challenge of being seen as a leader. He has authority given to him by Elijah, but does he have power? Will the people allow him to influence them or will they use their own power to fight every decision he makes? If you have ever had to feel your way around a new job or a new school trying to figure out how you fit in and how you can affect the structure already in place then you probably have some idea of what Elisha is experiencing.

While we can most likely empathize with both Elijah and Elisha, who are we, as a parish, in this story? We are the crowd standing on the banks of the Jordan watching this whole drama unfold; knowing that all we can do at the moment is watch and wait to see what happens. We have no control over the outcome, but we do have control over how we receive our new priest, our Elisha. We don't get to hear the rest of the story of how the crowd received Elisha, but if you keep reading second Kings you will discover that it wasn't a great reception. They didn't welcome him with open arms and say, "Now what, boss?" Instead, they refused to believe that Elijah was truly gone and essentially demanded that Elisha send men to look for Elijah so that the master could be returned to his rightful place. They wanted Elijah back. They did not want this Elijah-masquerading-wanna-be whom they didn't know. They were unable to let go of Elijah and unwilling to accept Elisha.

While the crowd on the bank of the Jordan's story is already written, our story is still a blank page. How will we accept our new priest? Will we welcome him or her with open hearts and minds and say, "Now what, boss?" or will we be closed off to change and look back at every turn?

Blank pages are both scary and exciting. Trust me; I've stared at enough of them. Blank pages are full of endless possibilities, opportunities and paths. They are daunting and petrifying. It is tempting to revert back to the comfort of what we know, to walk away and let others fill the pages for us because we are too scared to move forward. But they are also delightful and stimulating. Anything can happen as all things are new. A blank page is a new life, a new way of being. There is a giddy excitement that fills us as we take our first step forward on a grand adventure as words begin flow across the page.

But we have to let go of our own preconceived notions about how the story should go and be open to changes that we never thought possible. We have to have trust and have faith in something larger than ourselves; letting the Holy Spirit nudge us in the direction that we are meant to go.

Change and transformation is an essential part of who we are as followers of Christ. When we are baptized we are changed, marked forever as Christ's own as we inherit His mantle of transforming love. When we open our hearts and minds to the Spirit, we are changed again and find the power to change the lives of those around us by sharing Christ's love with the world. Christ's love drives us forward.

We have done great things here at St. Michael's and through God's grace, Christ's unending transforming love and the Spirit's wisdom even greater things are in store for us as the mantle is passed and we are changed.

Amen.

