

Passing on Mantles & Mysteries

Proper 8C: 2 Kings 2.1-2, 6-14

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Among the clutter in my office, several shelves above a waddle of rubber ducks, sits a game spinner. Kind of a homemade wheel of fortune. It's a souvenir from a clergy roast to raise money for Camp Mitchell in Arkansas. Which is where our own Semmes Schneider and Lucy Cochran happened to spend the past week. As these celebrity studded occasions often do, I'm pretty sure the event raised something in the high three figures that night.

Our friend Jay was my roaster, and he started by saying, "A lot of you probably wonder where Scott gets sermon ideas. Well, I broke into his office the other day and found this." At which he produced the spinner.

Instead of dollar amounts, however, the wheel's sections are: Carpentry, Ardelle, Carpentry, Alden, Carpentry, Kate, Woodworking, Riff on one word from the Gospel, Carpentry, Dog, Carpentry.

He said, "Here's how I think it works," and gave the wheel a spin. It landed on ... surprise ... "carpentry." "So," Jay said, "this sermon might begin, 'The other day I was installing wainscoting with an 18-gauge brad nailer and construction adhesive. And there was a depression in the wall. And as I was pushing on the board, trying to nail it down, I thought, 'You know, life's a lot like this sometimes, isn't it?'"

Then he said, "Let's try another," and gave the wheel a second spin. This time it landed on "Ardelle." And Jay said, "Here's how this one might go: 'The other day I was talking to Ardelle, while I was installing wainscoting with an 18-gauge brad nailer and construction adhesive...'"

Preachers. Ours is one of the few professions in which there's a regularly scheduled time and place for us to pass the mantle of our wisdom on to a roomful of other people. We like to think we have salient and edifying things to say on all kinds of important matters, both the sacred and the profane. The old saw about most of us having one sermon that we keep preaching versions of, week after week, is probably closer to the truth. And some of us may have only one sermon illustration!

But there's another illusion I think we preachers entertain more than other people. And that is that the most important things we have to pass on to one another can be spoken at all. That we can pass on the truth or the gospel or anything that matters most to our lives just with words. Just by talking.

So. Since I am a preacher, I'm going to try to talk about that. I'm going to try to talk about how the most important things God has made each of us to pass on to one another can't be passed on just by talking. Not only that, the deepest parts of ourselves, and maybe our greatest gifts, may remain mysteries even to ourselves. And even the mystery of how and whether we pass them on at all may be beyond us.

You don't have to be terribly religious to have heard that the prophet Elijah was taken up in a flaming chariot, coming for to carry him home, as the old spiritual says. That this happened when Elijah was passing on his mantle to his prophetic understudy, Elisha, isn't quite so widely known. But that's what the story we just read is really about, isn't it?

I love it when a story begins with a "Wait. What?" Know what I mean? In today's reading, it's, "When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind..." Wait. What? Who drops a detail like that in so nonchalantly and then moves on? It casually sets up the story, as if the two prophets were walking to the Seven Eleven for Slurpees.

But the setup reinforces that the point of the story is not how Elijah gets to heaven. That's just one spectacular detail among others. The point is the passing on of his mantle. The passing on of his spirit, his power, his ministry among God's people. It's as if the storyteller doesn't want us to get too distracted by the chariot bit, so he tells us it's coming right up front.

There are plenty of other unbelievable details here. Elijah's mantle, you may know, is a garment. It's his cloak. And I always think of Linus when I read that he somehow wraps it up like a staff and strikes the Jordan River, parting it in a really impressive Moses impersonation. Remember how Linus could make his blanket into anything he needed? Clearly more confirmation that Linus was a great prophet too, right?

But these Moses-like details have been piling up on Elijah. Remember last week when he wrapped this same mantle around his face as he stood at the entrance of the cave while the presence of God passed by in the sheer silence? Well that cave was on the same mountain where God hid Moses in a cleft while God's glory passed by and made the prophet's face shine.

So, experiencing the presence of God and not dying, parting a body of water and passing over on dry land, these aren't random literary coincidences. They are telling us that these are the rarest sorts of prophets who have experienced the rarest kinds of miraculous and terrifying things. See why these two are the ones who show up on the mountain with Jesus at the Transfiguration?

But what could a story like this one have to do with lives like yours and like mine? I don't know about you, but I'm not even among the 50 lesser prophets who got to watch Elijah's little Prince of Egypt reenactment. I've never seen such a thing. Have you?

But just as Israel's status as God's people was to be for the blessing of the whole world, I truly believe that anyone with some astonishing experience or gift in the Bible only has these for the benefit of the rest of us somehow. It's never enough for special effects just to set somebody apart as special. Not in scripture.

And here's what's standing out for me as I return to this strange old story with the ordinary particulars of my life today. Impressive as Elijah's Moses-like prophetic superpowers are to us, they remain a mystery to him. They're not entirely within his control either, are they? He's not at all sure he can pass them on to Elisha.

Elisha says, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." And Elijah, who has just parted a river with his coat, says, "You have asked a hard thing. We'll just have to see." Apparently the great gift he bears to the world is not something he understands enough to pass it reliably on.

I've been reading a book by a sociologist named Richard Sennett titled *The Craftsman*. In it, he explores how knowledge gets passed on in everything from medieval goldsmith guilds to the Linux community of open-source computer programmers. One of his most fascinating case studies is the Stradivarius violin shop. You don't have to be a musician to know that there's nothing quite like a Stradivarius to string players. And you may know that for more than three centuries now, not just luthiers, but scientists have been trying to crack the mystery of what makes a Stradivarius so special.

Antonio Stradivari's workshop probably looked a lot like other luthier shops of the time. It would have been a place where apprentices and journeymen worked and lived. The shop would have buzzed with activity from dawn till dusk, the unmarried apprentices sleeping under their benches at night on beds of straw. Stradivari's own sons would have been expected to do the same.

The youngest apprentices would soak wood for bending and make rough cuts, journeymen shaped the instrument bellies and assembled the necks, and the master himself took over the ultimate assembly and varnishing. So there were dozens and dozens of hands that took part in crafting Stradivarius instruments over the decades that Antonio was master of the shop.

But here is a mystery. When Antonio Stradivari died, so did some irreplaceable aspect of the Stradivarius violin. For all the overt and tacit passing on of knowledge and technique that took place among all those luthiers for all those years, Antonio Stradivari was somehow conveying something as he wandered among them, overseeing their work each day, that even he must not have fully understood. He possessed a form of knowledge that even he didn't know how to pass along. His

sons, Ombono and Francesco never married, and spent their entire adult lives as the servant-heirs of their father. They inherited the operation upon Antonio's death, and traded on the Stradivarius name for several years, but the business soon foundered. And no one has quite built a true Stradivarius since.

Now, there are several ways to read this story. And the most obvious one is pretty depressing. If even Antonio Stradivari can't pass on the mantle of his genius, what can any of us hope to pass on of worth to the people we encounter, and then on to the world? Elisha did end up inheriting the double portion of Elijah's spirit, parting the river again to get back across after the chariot swung down and picked up the old man. But even his ministry was very different from his elder's. He wasn't invited to the Transfiguration, you know.

That's the negative reading. But what if we take a step back and ask whether God ever intended for us each to be in control of our gifts. What if there is an important humility before the mystery of who you are and what you have to offer to the world and an implicit reminder in these stories that the particular mantle, the particular genius of who you are is meant to be offered as an embodied whole, in real time, as your life, to the world and the people around you? And because this is so, maybe we should be humbler and more open to what God will do with what you let go of through your life, and less certain of what your gift will look like when it shows up in the life of someone else.

I think this is why, for each spectacular thing that happened that day when the Lord was about to take Elijah up in a whirlwind, at least today, what I'm hearing is his humility. "You ask a hard thing," he says to Elisha. "We'll just have to see." And maybe implicit in that hesitation is also the truth that God has never been about keeping some perfect version of what it means to be human, or some singular version of what it means to be faithful, alive in the world.

When Jesus described the reign of God, it wasn't as some fixed inheritance to be preserved and passed on intact. It was like a few mustard seeds exploding into a bush full of birds or a little yeast blowing up a loaf of bread like a balloon. He told his followers that they and we would do even greater things than he did after he was gone. He said he was leaving, not Christian operating instructions or even a fixed set of holy scriptures, but a Holy Spirit who would work within and among us a lead us into all sorts of new life and possibilities.

What we also know is that when people have been absolutely certain they know what the capital T Truth is that they were meant to pass along, or certain they know exactly what Justice with a capital J looks like, we've too often done great damage to one another and to our world. The biblical model, from Moses to Elijah to Elisha, from Mary to Elizabeth, and on down through the stories of our faith, is a lineage of people who brought their whole, embodied selves to the world, and offered them to the purposes of God. Purposes of which they might have gotten remarkable glimpses, but they had no illusions of being fully in control. I'd even include Jesus among those who wondered humbly about how what they passed on would actually play out in lives he didn't control.

Which, in the end, is why these strange ancient people are still my heroes, and I hope they're still some of yours. Not for their magical powers and mind-blowing visions, but for the way they humbly offer the particular gifts and experiences of their lives to the world, and let them take hold as they will in lives that are not their own, in ways they can't predict or control, but in the ways God knows this world truly needs.