

Proper 8 C Sermon  
II Kings 2:1-12  
June 26, 2022

*A Double Dose*  
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*Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. <sup>7</sup>As they both were standing by the Jordan [River], Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. <sup>9</sup>When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." <sup>10</sup>He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." <sup>11</sup>As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. <sup>12</sup>Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.*

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I once heard a story about a doctor and his daughter. One day, the doctor was driving the 3-year-old to nursery school. He had left his stethoscope in the back seat of his car and on the way there his little girl picked it up and began playing with it. "Be still my heart," thought the doctor, "my daughter wants to follow in my footsteps..." Then the kid spoke into the stethoscope... "Welcome to McDonalds, may I take your order?"

Our reading this morning from the Hebrew scripture, the second book of Kings, is a peculiar one and shares a common theme with the story about the doctor and his daughter: the theme of following in another's footsteps. Elijah, the elder and prophet of Israel, and Elisha, the younger, are travelling together towards the place where God will take Elijah in a whirlwind. The pair finally reach the Jordan River and Elijah takes off his cloak, rolls it up like a staff -like the staff of Moses perhaps- and strikes the water with it. Like the waters of the great Red Sea, the waters of the Jordan peeled open like the covers of some great book and the two walked across on dry ground. Next, Elijah asks his beloved pupil what last thing he might do for him, he knows his time is short, and Elisha responds, "Give me a double portion of *your* spirit." Now, we know a little something about double portions, we're Americans and Midwesterners at that! We like double portions and we love getting two for the price of one! Elisha, however, was invoking the ancient inheritance laws that promise a double portion of inheritance to the eldest son.

As they were walking, a chariot of fire and horses swept Elijah up and carried him heavenward. Now the younger Elisha is alone and he tears his clothes in grief. The story goes on but that is where the lection leaves us, on the edges of our seats wondering, did he get a double dose of Elijah's spirit?

I have to admit, when I read this the first time, I couldn't help but think that Elisha had pretty big sandals to fill. One commentator suggested that Elisha felt so ill equipped, so insufficient that he thought he needed twice his teacher's spirit to make up the difference. If we look at the text his way, we might think it's suggesting that we're supposed to do everything in our power to pick up where the great ones leave off - to fill their sandals.

Life, however, reveals that it can't just be about picking up where someone else leaves off. It's not always about doing things the

way someone else did them, or the way they've always been done. I'm reminded of a story<sup>1</sup> that I think helps illustrate my point. Dorothea Lange snapped the iconic Great Depression photo of "Migrant Mother" in 1936. If I could show you the black and white photo now I know you'd recognize the beautiful, but tired features of the slender woman: her dark hair falling just above her kind, sad eyes, her brow furrowed with worry, her hard-working hand gently curled next to her strong jaw as she sat. Two young children buried their faces in her shoulders and an infant lay across her lap.

The woman was then 32-year-old Florence Owens Thompson with her children. Thompson's daughter, Katherine, was four when the photo was taken. The story I read tells of Katherine's resolve to work hard, like her mother, but to make sure that life for her and for her family would not be like it had been for her mother. She overcame many obstacles- education, prejudice, financial difficulty, and harsh ridicule- but has worked hard to make a better life. Katherine went forward in the same spirit as her mother, the spirit of tenacity and determination, the spirit of hard work and firm resolve, but she charted a different course through life than her mother was able to forge before her.

We have all heard, at one time or another, of the merits of following in the footsteps of a mother or father, a leader, or mentor. Communities too are often guided back onto the paths forged sometime in the distant, or not so distant past. There are times, and places, and peoples for whom this earlier path is also their path, the one that they, in response to a need and with their unique identities, passions, abilities can walk with integrity.

Sometimes, the shoes of another are just our size, but sometimes we are called out of those shoes, off those paths, and out of those

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<sup>1</sup> Thelma Gutierrez and Wayne Drash. "Girl from iconic Great Depression photo: 'We were ashamed,'" CNN.com, December 3, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/12/02/dustbowl.photo/index.html>.

ways of being and into something very different. Something new. But the truth is, the same creative spirit, the same sustaining life-force, animates us, is activated in us that was active in those we follow, whether we follow in their footsteps or blaze a new course through an untamed wilderness.

Perhaps Elijah understood this. Perhaps, when he told his younger pupil that if he could see him in the whirlwind as his own life expired, if he could just catch a glimpse of that spirit, he would know that the same spirit was already alive in him, not making him into an image of his teacher, but equipping him to be fully himself. Elisha went on to do terrible and wonderful things like his teacher before him, but not just like his teacher. He saw the fiery chariot setting like the sun on Elijah's life, he saw him in the whirlwind, and the sun came up on his own life's work. Now he was the prophet of Israel, but not the same prophet that had gone before him.

Like Elisha, we too are inheritors: inheritors of tradition, of family trees, of national and historic identities, of dreams- dreams for us by those who were before us. We are all inheritors, young and old, of one and the same spirit, a spirit of curiosity and of action. We are all inheritors of a spirit that invites us to make life new in every generation, in every day and, at times, to re-imagine life, to recast our own individual and communal identities, to reclaim hopes and dreams slipped by the wayside. It is a spirit of being and becoming.

As we go, may we know that we too are inheritors of a double dose of the spirit of life. May the paths we tread lead us to discovery and to fulfillment, and may we go forth, not to become someone else or to fill their shoes, but to become more fully who we are. Amen.