

"Passing the Mantle"

I Kings 17:1-7

Dr. David W. Swink

Chilson Hills Church, Brighton, Michigan

June 5, 2011

Elijah the Spiritual Leader of Israel

Elijah breaks on the scene of Israeli politics telling powerful King Ahab that God is unhappy with God's people. We know nothing of Elijah before this encounter with the King. We know a great deal about the Prophet Elijah after his prediction of a drought. Elijah was a spiritual leader driven by God's vision for God's people. The people of Israel were continually tempted to worship many gods. Elijah held before the people of Israel the vision of one God found in the words of the ancient Shema; "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one!"

As the spiritual leader of Israel Elijah experienced mountain top spiritual victories and deep cave depressions. In between the highs and the lows, Elijah did the best he could to challenge the people to live God's vision.

Elijah provides us with a model for spiritual leadership

For any spiritual leader God's vision is primary. It is God's vision for God's people that encourages, sustains, and challenges the leader. As with Elijah any spiritual leader will experience mountain tops and deep caves, great moments with God and times when God seems absent.

Early in my ministry I learned the importance of God's vision for Chilson. I do not in any way compare myself to the great prophet Elijah. Yet, I know that God's vision for Chilson has been central to my leadership for 32 years. We have reworked the wording about 4 times but God's essential vision for Chilson has remained.

"God calls us to connect together with Christ in order to serve all God's people, renewing ourselves through Jesus' teachings of love, healing and forgiveness."

God's vision for us is symbolized in the "Peace Pole" planted in the center of these 12 acres to proclaim to the world that this is a zone of God's peace. We are a Beloved Community of God where all are welcome to worship our One God in peace.

During the last 32 years there have been many spiritual high points: youth and adult mission trips; 3 building projects; two mortgage burnings; establishment of Lifegroups, mission and ministry teams; the development of the Memorial Garden; growing connections with African American congregations; housing Livingston Counties homeless individuals and families; hosting a worship service at the first tee of Oak Pointe Golf Course and being featured on CNN worldwide news, and much, much more.

And, there have been some deep cave experiences. For me those times in the cave feeling abandoned by God came when people I loved walked away and would not have further conversation with me but felt free to characterize me in rather ugly terms with everyone they talked to about me. As with Elijah, God came to me after a time and provided me with a deeper and richer understanding of the need to give and receive God's forgiveness.

God's vision for God's people is supported by a rich connection of past, present, and future. God's vision is not dependent on one person or one leader. Within the Beloved Community there are DNA strands that shape the very life of the community. Allow me to share with you the action items, the DNA, the values that support God's vision here at Chilson.

We seek to live meaningfully.

Several weeks ago I preached of God's vision of a Beloved community growing and serving here at Chilson. We find meaning and our true selves as we live in community and serve with community. There are many moments that real meaning flowed into all of us as God moved among us. Some of the many moments I can think of are: The all Church Retreat at Emrich Center when we developed over 400 action plans for change; Planting the Peace Pole; moving from the old Sanctuary into our new Worship Center; sharing with Bethany families in homes and worship; Worshipping with Hartford Memorial on Good Friday; A March Church Business meeting when Chilson said no to cutting staff salaries and yes to giving more to God; and an October Church Business meeting when Chilson said yes to our new Pastor, Rev. D.J. Reed.

God's people find meaning within a community of love, healing, and forgiveness.

We seek to love unconditionally.

I can tell story after story of the way God has moved among us teaching us how to love with Christ's unconditional love. Allow me to reach back into Chilson's history before I came onto the scene and tell you two stories from the beginning of the church.

In the early stages of Chilson the charter members faced a doctrinal challenge. Would they accept into membership a person who was baptized as an infant without requiring them to be baptized by immersion? In other words, did a person who was sprinkled have to get dunked before they could be a member? After several weeks of heated discussion, that original group decided that God was calling them to open membership. So a person baptized as an infant would be accepted into membership and offered the opportunity to be baptized in the way Jesus was baptized if they chose to do so. God's love and rich hospitality won out over a parochial doctrine.

God's vision of a community where all people are welcomed and unconditionally loved is alive here at Chilson.

We seek to learn continually.

This DNA portion of God's vision is not just about knowledge. Learning about the Bible is good, but learning to live God's truth found within the Bible is much better. Learning involves the humility of admitting that we do not know. Learning involves the work of evaluation to find out what we need to know. And, learning involves the work necessary to transform ourselves from knowledge to greater wisdom.

My passion for this portion of God's vision for us came to me in the early 1990's with a dream experience shared with me by one of our Deacons. She asked to see me because she had just had a nightmare and needed to talk about it. Her dream was set in the old church building. She went into the old sanctuary and found an enormous, ugly monster lounging on top of the pews across one side of the church. My friend told the monster that he did not belong in the church. He said that he lived here. She said that he had to leave. He said he would not because he liked it here. She then asked him his name to which he replied, "My name is mediocrity."

Since hearing that dream I have urged us to evaluate, evaluate, and evaluate. We have taken the all church evaluation process Natural Church Development four times. We have instituted a culture of regular evaluation within Worship Design Team. Chilson is who Chilson is today because we have regularly sought to learn from our mistakes so that we can be the best we can be for God.

We seek to leave a legacy of hope.

Our hope is based upon our trust in God's presence in the past, present, and future. At Chilson we know that God will provide what we need. God has richly provided for us throughout the last 36 years. We have watched as the Charter members stepped aside as new leaders emerged. This pattern of leadership transition within God's Beloved Community is not new.

The Prophet Elijah knew that leadership transition was necessary. Elijah prepared a younger man to take over his role as spiritual leader of God's people. Hope in God is a tangible reality. Hope is not something we just talk about. Hope in God is a lived reality.

I cannot put into words how proud I am of Chilson. When I returned as pastor in 1992 after a year away, Deacon Jesse Ping pulled me aside and said, "We are not going to ever do pastoral transition this way again. You have to come up with another way." So, six years ago the Personnel Team began to plan for our new spiritual leader. I greatly appreciate all those people who were on the Personnel Team, the Deacons, the Executive Ministry Team, and the Pulpit committee. I appreciate the shared sacrifice that all of you have made to create a six month transition process. I stand in awe of the way God has brought into our midst our next committed and skilled leader.

A people of God need a leader inspired by God in order to live God's vision. And, God has brought into our midst just such a spiritual leader. I want you to know that I hope and pray that Pastor D.J. Reed has a double portion of God's strength so that he can lead Chilson to an ever greater experience of God's powerful, creative vision.

“Double Share”
Transition Sunday (Asc.Sunday)
2 Kings 2:9-14

<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

D.J. Reed

Chilson Hills Church, Howell, MI

June 5, 2011

You heard earlier from David about Elijah, the greatest of all prophets, and how he was called to speak the word of the Lord to Israel.

Throughout his prophetic career, Elijah challenged the wicked but powerful King Ahab.

He defeated the primary religious leaders after a contest was decided by fire from heaven.

He turned Israel away from idol worship and back to the one true God.

He outran a horse.

He prayed for rain to return to the drought-stricken land and it did.

He survived in the desert on food served by ravens.

And he heard God from a dark cave through the sound of a whisper.

Now that’s a resume! It’s about time for him to retire isn’t it?

And Elijah knows it’s time to retire, which is why he hand-picks a guy whose name sounds eerily similar to his name: Elisha. He does this by taking his mantle, which is kind of like a scarf, and placing it on Elisha’s shoulders.

It’s kind of like when the winner of the Master’s receives the green jacket from the previous winner, or when a mother passes on her wedding dress to her daughter. Kind of like that... but not really. This passing of the mantle was more than a symbolic or sentimental gift. It was like Elijah was passing a part of himself to Elisha.

In my office, I have a belt hanging on my wall. It’s an artillery belt that was given to me by John Pittman – a church member who recently passed away.

This was the belt worn by John when he was in Vietnam. It’s not in pristine condition, it has stains on it, the green fabric is worn and faded, and there’s a frayed corner that would have settled in between the shoulder blades.

But it’s because of that frayed corner that John kept the belt and cherished it; because that frayed corner marked the spot where a bullet hit John and then ricocheted off his helmet – leaving him unharmed. “That belt and God saved my life,” John said.

That’s no ordinary belt. And that mantle that Elijah had was no ordinary scarf either.

And Elijah proved this when he rolled this mantle up and smacked the water. Elisha, who had been with Elijah for some time, watched in amazement as the water split apart and made a dry path for Elijah and Elisha to cross over like the Israelites crossing through the Red Sea.

And when Elijah and Elisha get to the other side, Elijah asks “What can I do for you before I go?” And Elisha says, “I want a double share of your spirit.”

Now many people, when reading this passage think that Elisha is asking for twice the prophetic power of his mentor, Elijah. They read it like Elisha just went to the counter at McDonalds and Elijah, standing behind the counter asks, “How may I help you?” and Elisha says, “I want Combo #6” and super-size it!

But that’s not what Elisha is saying. The language being used by Elisha is one of “inheritance.” He’s looking at Elijah like he’s his father (something he calls him later on when Elijah leaves in a chariot), and he wants twice the inheritance he will receive.

Now, to a prophet, an inheritance is a divine ability to tell the truth, to speak boldly and persuasively, to call on God to action.

Elisha considers the work that is ahead of him and the challenges he must face and he knows he needs a lot of help.

For those of you who shop at Costco purchasing 8-packs of Colgate toothpaste, 3 gallon jugs of Cheer, and bags of Chex Mix the size of garbage bags, you know what Elisha talking about. You don’t need all of that right now... but you will. You purchase a double share of something because you know you’ll eventually need it in the future.

Elisha is looking at his life the same way, he’s a bit anxious about what’s in store and so, he asks for a double share, a “Costco portion” of what Elijah is going to give to him before he leaves.

Elijah tells him this is a difficult thing. He can't grant him such power, only God can give so generously.

And then, like some crazy scene from Harry Potter, a chariot of fire sweeps in between the two prophets, plucks Elijah up then rockets into the sky leaving a whirlwind behind.

Elisha stares up at the sky with tears in his eyes, and there is nothing left but a cloud of dust and that trusty mantle on the ground.

Now, I don't have to tell you that there are quite a few similarities between this story and the one you are witnessing today.

No, David is not leaving today in a chariot fueled by a whirlwind (although he is going up into the sky on a plane to Hawaii – that's like heaven right?).

But we are witnessing a "passing of the mantle" today. We are saying goodbye and we are beginning something new. The ministry of Elijah was passed on to Elisha through a succession plan, and that is what you are witnessing today as well.

For the past five years, this church has prepared for an event such as this, and in November of 2010, you decided to pass the mantle from David Wesley Swink to David John Reed (eerily similar names right?).

And for these past six months David has graciously walked beside me, not over me, to prepare me for this day.

And you have done the same. You have walked beside me and have been gracious enough to call me pastor. You have allowed me to serve you, and you have given me access into your lives.

We're ready for this. You're ready. David is ready. And I'm ready too. But that doesn't mean that we won't be sad.

Just like Elisha wept over Elijah when he left, we will be sad as well. Even though David will continue to be among us, we know that it won't be the same. And you will be sad. And I will be sad too.

For the last six months, David and I have not only worked together, we've also sang together as the duo of baritones in the Chilson choir dubbed, "The Balcony People."

Well, a couple of months ago, David and I were in choir practice on the Wednesday before we were to sing during the Sunday worship service. David, however, was going to be out of town, and I wanted to know that I could handle the singing on my own. So, at one point, I leaned over and whispered to David, "Hey, let me sing on my own this time."

The Balcony People stood, and David and Jaime sat down. And I wish I could describe the feelings I felt at that moment when I sang the part by myself.

I realized how much I missed David's voice, and how much I had leaned on his uncanny ability to find the right note. I felt bold and independent, but I could see David in the corner of my eye, sitting, and I felt a sense of loss. He's still here, but I miss him.

In the upcoming months, we will all realize how much we have leaned on David, and we will all, in varying degrees, miss him. We will marvel at what God has done through him and how he has been used to transform so many lives and we will wonder what's next?

That's what Elisha seems to think in the story. After the chariot has gone to heaven, he bends down picks up the mantle that had been left behind and walks over to the bank of the Jordan River, now flowing again.

And you can almost sense Elisha's doubt and you can hear the uncertainty in his voice, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he says. Will he receive that "double share"? Will he be blessed as Elijah was? Will God continue to work through him as he did through Elisha?

You can imagine all of these questions are spinning through his mind as he smacks the water with that mysterious mantle.

And lo and behold, that water parts, And Elisha goes back over. He had received the double share he wanted. And now it was time to continue what was started.

Today is the 36th Anniversary of Chilson Hills Baptist Church. It began in the basement of Judy Kernell, moved to a building of Boy Scouts and finally settled in a marshy piece of property given to us by Pastor Gordon Schroeder.

Some of the original founding saints of the church are still with us – Les Upton, Sue Wilson, Joyce Leighton & Diana Berry – and some are still with us, but are resting in the Memorial Garden outside.

We have been blessed by the ministry of saints with last names like Wyeth, Zimmerly, Kontz, Meeden, Keymer, Apple, Anderson, Birdsong, Brown, Green, Doyle, Lybrink, Leighton, Marquardt, Morton & Bartolacci.

And I look out at you, those who remain, who have supported and loved David Swink for 32 years, and I ask you to join me in asking for a double share. Let's carry their bold vision and let's pick up where they have left off. Let's use the glory from their ministry to propel our own.

Let's look at those barriers in front of us and smack it hard, knowing that there is nothing that can stand between us and the ministry God has called us to. We don't have to fear the future, feel anxious about the economy, or worry about failure. We look at what is ahead and we say, "We have what we need. We have our double share."

We are ready for this. Let's go to the other side.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS
For Sunday, June 5, 2011's Sermon
Foundational Scripture: 1 Kings 17:1-7; 2 Kings 2:9-14
(<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>)

Featured Scripture Reflection: "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.'" – Luke 24:15 (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>)

Opening Icebreaker: Can you recall a bold request you may have made in your past (example: a proposal to a woman, a bargain etc.)? How did you feel before, during and after such a request?

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Read 2 Kings 2:9-14 (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>). What did you notice as you read that story? What words or phrases stand out to you?
- Read 1 Kings 17:1-7(<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>) . What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this passage help you understand Elijah?
- Read 2 Kings 2:1-8 (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>). Think about what you've just read. Does it help you understand the story of Elisha and Elijah more?

How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the "Good News" in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do these passages make me feel?
- How do these passages challenge you?

God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

A prayer

God, help us to hear your voice. Help us to respond to your call, to make bold requests and see the exciting vision for our lives. Amen