River Crossings

Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

June 26, 2022

Sarah Wolf

Over the past two weeks, I’ve been putting together a curriculum for Massanetta’s girls-only Day Camp. This particular week of camp is made possible by a grant from a donor who specifically wanted a week where girls could come together and play and learn and study the Bible. With this in mind, I tried to put together a Bible curriculum that highlighted women of the Bible, women of faith in our Christian history, and women in their own lives who are inspiring.

I used the book, “Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints” by Daneen Akers which is an illustrated children’s book and is a compilation of people throughout history who have worked for love and justice in their own corners of the world, even if that meant rocking the religious boat.[[1]](#footnote-1) I picked five women who were holy troublemakers and paired them up with Bible stories that matched the same kind of trouble.

In the coming week, we’ll study Anne Hutchinson, the Puritan woman who was kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for leading a Bible study in her home at a time when women were forbidden to teach. That story will be paired with the women at the tomb on Easter morning. The girls will read about how the women arrived at the tomb and were told by an angel that Jesus was not there, that he had risen, and that they were to go quickly and tell the good news to the apostles. They’ll hear how the women hurried back to the apostles to report to them what they saw and how the apostles chalked it up to an “idle tale” or…women talk. They’ll learn how women were in fact the first ones to preach the good news of the resurrection.

The girls will learn about Harriet Tubman who risked her own freedom by returning back to the South 13 times to help enslaved people escape and how she felt that “God had called her to this task and given her special gifts for it.” After hearing about Harriet Tubman, the girls will study Miriam, Moses’s sister, who bravely stepped forward when Pharaoh’s daughter found Moses in the Nile. Miriam’s family had broken the law by not casting Moses into the river and Miriam risked her own safety by speaking up. If she had not done so, Moses wouldn’t have spent his earliest years with his own family, hearing the stories of the Hebrew people which would then echo in his head when he saw the Hebrew people oppressed and abused.

Our key verse for the week is Hebrews 12:1 (from the CEB version): So then, let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us.” We’ll construct a “Faith Hall of Fame” using images from the “Holy Troublemakers” book as well as artistic depictions of our Bible stories. The girls will finish their Bible time each day by drawing a portrait of someone in their own lives who has taught them the particular values we studied.

My goal throughout the week is that the girls will learn that they stand on the shoulders of many, many strong and brave women — that they come from a long line of justice seekers and holy troublemakers. I want them to also know, though, that they have a place in this lineage. On the final day of the week, the girls will draw their own portraits and add them to the wall. My hope is that they will see their own portraits alongside Florence Nightingale or Rachel Held Evans, Queen Esther or Mary, the mother of Jesus, and my hope is that they will see themselves fitting in among these women and that they will feel called to continue the work.

I’ve been spending a lot of time with these stories and thinking about lineage and inheritance and vocation. And so when I read this week’s passage from 2 Kings, the phrase “taking up the mantle” had already been rattling around in my head for a while. That phrase “take up the mantle,” which we hear everywhere from sports to politics, is an allusion to today’s Bible story in which Elisha literally takes up Elijah’s mantle and assumes the role of chief prophet.

Today’s text is about a passing of the torch. In it, we have Elijah, who has been chief prophet during the time of the kings during which Elijah spent a good bit of time warning the kings to act right and to follow God and not their own selfish interests. One commentary writer notes that “like their predecessor in Egypt, these monarchs [were] constantly and anxiously at work keeping the existing political structures from which they profit[ed] in good working ‘order.’”[[2]](#footnote-2) Elijah had been busy trying to warn the kings that they were abusing their power and oppressing the vulnerable in the process.

And Elisha? Well, Elisha had just been kind of following Elijah around. In 1 Kings, we see how Elijah called Elisha from the field he’d been plowing. The text in 1 Kings tells us that God instructed Elijah to go and find Elisha and anoint him to become the prophet in his place. But when Elijah finds Elisha in the field, he doesn’t give any indication to Elisha that that was where they were headed - that Elisha would be a kind of apprentice and would learn from Elijah. There is no anointing. Instead, Elijah throws his mantle over Elisha and Elisha turns and follows him.

When today’s text in 2 Kings begins, there is no real indication that Elisha knows what’s in store for him. One commentary writer suggested that Elisha was more of a servant or secretary for Elijah. Yes, he was getting on-the-job training in that he was a witness to Elijah’s prophetic voice, but when today’s text begins, Elisha still doesn’t quite know what’s ahead.

There’s also a little bit of an indication that Elijah maybe wasn’t *ready* to pass his prophetic power along to Elisha. Three times, Elijah commands Elisha to stay behind but three times Elisha refuses to stay behind. “As long as the Lord lives,” Elisha tells him, “and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” And so, Elisha continues on with Elijah, witnessing Elijah using his mantle to part the waters of the Jordan.

Perhaps Elisha has passed Elijah’s test because as soon as they cross the parted waters of the river, Elijah turns to Elisha and says, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha asks for a double inheritance of Elijah’s spirit. He isn’t asking for twice the amount of Elijah’s power, but for twice of what any other “son” might get. Earlier in the text, there is a mention of the “company of prophets” and Elisha is signaling that he wants to be seen as Elijah’s rightful heir, as singled out among the company of prophets. Elijah responds by saying, “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.”

It’s probably not the most reassuring response that Elisha was hoping for. There’s no “Of course you may have a double inheritance, Elisha! You will be my heir! You will know my prophetic power!” Instead, there’s this cryptic response from Elijah about Elisha needing to see Elijah taken up in order to receive the inheritance.

And so with that echoing in Elisha’s mind, the chariot of fire and the horses of fire separate them, and Elisha *does* see Elijah lifted up. It’s perhaps why he cries out, “Father! Father! The chariots of Israel and horsemen!” Elisha’s trying to make sense of what is happening *and* is trying to reassure whoever is watching this that he *did* see Elijah lifted up.

And then…Elijah is gone. And Elisha is left behind. He is deep in grief. He tears his clothes in his mourning. And then…he sees Elijah’s mantle has been left behind. It’s the same mantle that had covered Elijah’s face when God appeared in the sheer silence. It’s the same mantle that had been used to quasi-anoint Elisha into service. It’s the same mantle that Elijah had *just* *used* to part the Jordan. That mantle. Elisha picks it up and attempts the same kind of water-parting technique that Elijah had used. He rolls it up and strikes the water with it saying, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” And lo and behold, the waters part just as they had with Elijah.

And just like that, Elisha is confirmed as the rightful heir of Elijah and will now be expected and able to follow in Elijah’s footsteps. Easy peasey, right?

Probably not. It was probably a lot more complicated than that.

I imagine that Elisha let out a huge breath of relief when he saw the waters part. It was a confirmation from God that he would have Elijah’s power and that he would be Elijah’s heir in Israel. It was also confirmation for the company of prophets who were watching at a distance. The next verse after our lectionary passage begins tells us that when the company of prophets saw what had happened and how Elisha had parted the waters, they said, “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha” and bowed down in reverence. But I bet until he saw those waters part, Elisha had some doubt in him. “Am I really about to step into Elijah’s shoes? Can I really be the person to take up his mantle?”

I also imagine that Elisha’s grief was still very much with him. He’s just lost his teacher, his closest companion. And now he was supposed to continue his work. How would that be possible? How could he possibly be able to fill Elijah’s metaphorical shoes?

The Rev. Dr. Carrie Mitchell suggests that “Knowing Elijah would be taken from him did not minimize Elisha’s grief; rather, it made his own ministry more poignant.”

Mitchell continues to tell the story of Composer Giacomo Puccini who, “in 1922, was suddenly stricken by cancer while working on his last opera, *Turandot*, which many now consider his best. Puccini said to his students, “If I don’t finish *Turandot*, I want you to finish it for me.” Shortly afterward he died. Puccini’s students studied the opera carefully and soon completed it. In 1926, the world premiere of *Turandot* was performed in Milan and Puccini’s favorite student, Arturo Toscanini, directed.

Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the point where Puccini had been forced to put down his pen. Tears ran down Toscanini’s face. He stopped the music, turned to the audience, and cried out, “Thus far the Master wrote, but he died.” A vast silence filled the opera house. Toscanini smiled through his tears and exclaimed, “But his disciples finished the work.” When *Turandot* ended, the audience broke into thunderous applause.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In his grief, Elisha took up Elijah’s mantle, did his best to emulate him, and did it in his own way, but he was always trying his best to remember all that Elijah had taught him. Perhaps Elijah watched Elisha at his prophetic work and said critically from time to time, “Hmm..I wouldn’t have done it that way.” But maybe other times, Elijah watched Elisha and in an approving voice said, “Whoa! I would never have *thought* to do it that way.”

Because Elisha was willing to take up the mantle *and* because Elijah was willing to guide him and nurture him, Elisha was able to serve the purposes of God as Elisha performed miracles and set up a new king in Israel and finished what Elijah had started.

Dr. Mitchell finishes her pastoral analysis of Elisha and Elijah by asking these questions: Whom are we nurturing? How are we nurturing them? Part of our own personal spiritual discipline,” she writes, “must be the discipleship of others who might assume our mantles, as Elisha assumed Elijah’s.”

So, Covenant, whom are we nurturing? How are we preparing them to take up our mantles and to cross the river to continue the work started so many generations ago? How are we telling folks that they are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and that their faces belong in that cloud as well?

While the secular world may have lost the religious significance of the phrase, may we continue to remember those who have gone before us who listened to God for discernment and may we continue to nurture those among us who *all* have gifts for service in God’s Church, encouraging them to take the work we’ve done and to make it their own, all for the glory of God.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. From the back of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Feasting on the Word; Trevor Eppehimer. Year C, Volume 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Feasting on the Word; Carrie Mitchel. Year C, Volume 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)