

“If You See Me”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
June 27, 2010

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then 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. 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." 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." 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. 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. He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. (2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14)

Which prophets do you know? Isaiah? Jeremiah? Ezekiel? I bet most of you are familiar with these names. But, how about Habakkuk, Zephaniah, or Zechariah? How many of you have ever heard of them? I am sure Esther knows all of them, and so do some of her former students who had the benefit of her Bible drills. We sometimes call the first group “major prophets” and the second, “minor prophets.” Here, the term "major" or “minor” refers to the length of their writings, and not their importance. They are all prophets of the ancient Israel.

Did you know that there is a yet another group of prophets in the Bible? Long or short, some prophets did not have any writings in the Bible named after them. We have two of these non-writing prophets in our first lesson today – Elijah and Elisha. They have no books named after them in the Bible. But again, it does not have anything to do with their importance. We know how significant a place Elijah holds in Israel’s tradition. To take just one example, Elijah, along with Moses, was one of the two prophets who appeared and spoke with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration.

In our lesson today, we have a unique and stirring story about Elijah’s departure. In a whirlwind, and with a chariot of fire and horses of fire, he is taken into heaven. Watching the scene, his servant and disciple, Elisha, cries out and tears his robe into pieces. The scene is heavy with mysterious imagery and intense emotions, enough so to make some of us, the

contemporary readers, shrug, doubtful of its intellectual relevance. Yet, I personally find the story deeply touching, and deeply human.

It was a difficult time in Israel, politically, economically, and spiritually. And here is an old prophet, Elijah, toward the end of his career. He was a bold and principled prophet. He was a fearless challenger and troubler of Israel. Throughout his life, he berated not only Baal and its prophets, but also the king and the queen and the people of Israel. Without a doubt, Elijah was one of the greatest prophets Israel has ever known. But now, he is aware that his time on earth is about to end.

Three times in our chapter, verses 2 and 4 and 6, Elijah says to his understudy, Elisha, "*I have to go. You stay here.*" What was he thinking? Did he want to face that moment, the moment of departure, alone? Or, did he want to release the younger prophet from his duty? At each stopping place, three times in our chapter, Elijah, the old prophet, says to Elisha, the younger, "*I am going, but you stay here.*" And three times, Elisha, the younger, vows not to leave his master. "*As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you,*" he asserts.

I don't know which is harder, to be the one leaving, or to be the one left behind. It is a tough call, isn't it? I guess that Elijah had a lot on his mind, and so did Elisha. Both of them certainly knew that the things were not going to be easy. Both of them certainly knew what it meant to be a prophet in a troubled world, in difficult times. Maybe it's just me, but I almost feel tenderness in the old prophet's threefold bidding to leave.

And yet, Elisha was determined. Elisha was persistent. Elisha was loyal. Three times, he was given a chance to leave his master and go his way, but three times, he chose to follow Elijah in his footsteps.

So, finally, Elijah stops asking Elisha to leave. Instead, he asks, "*Tell me what I may do for you, before I'm taken from you?*" And Elisha answers, "*Let me inherit a double share of your spirit.*"

In ancient Israel, the double share of inheritance was reserved for the first born son or the rightful heir. When Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit, he is not asking for twice the power, or twice the greatness, of Elijah. When Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit, he affirms his determination to succeed Elijah as a prophet. When Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit, he acknowledges that only the outpouring of the Spirit will make it possible for him to carry on.

"*You have asked a hard thing,*" answers Elijah. Yes, both the old and the younger prophets are fully aware that things are not going to be easy. Yet, this time, the old prophet adds, "*If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you. If not, it will not.*"

Even after clearly demonstrating unqualified loyalty and determination, the younger prophet still has one more test to pass. And it concerns seeing or vision. "*If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you. If not, it will not.*" With these words, the old prophet also makes it clear that the handing on of the prophetic spirit is not under his control. Elijah does not say that he will pass it on to him. Instead, he says that it will be granted to Elisha, if he can perceive the reality of God's activity.

In our story today, the younger prophet confirms what he sees. "*Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!*" he cries out. Yes, he can see it! Yes, beneath the surface of things, he sees the reality of God's presence and power! He has the vision to match his loyalty and determination! As he keeps watching, the old prophet is lifted up, and his mantle

falls to the ground. The younger prophet picks it up, thus claiming the symbol of prophetic authority as his own.

Today, we gathered as a people with a vision. Today, we gathered as a people determined to take up the story, pick up the mantle, and live the call God has placed upon our life as a community of faith.

Three years ago, on June 29, 2007, one of the prophets among us, Roland Hubbard, was taken into heaven. I know, some of you never knew Roland. I know, even if you knew him, you may think it odd to call him a prophet. You could easily look at Roland's life and say that he never did anything extraordinary. In some respects, you'd be right. Roland was an ordinary man. He enjoyed ordinary things, such as bowling, eating out, talking to people, and selling tickets for our Pancake Breakfast.

Yet, Roland was a man with an unswerving loyalty for his Lord. And his loyalty was matched with a clear vision for God's work. His heart was set on God and God's will for God's people! Upon his death, we discovered that he had left everything he owned for the mission and ministry of the church. Well, I should have said almost everything, because according to his will, the car he drove was given to one of his friends. When his estate was closed approximately one year ago, it totaled almost \$900,000. In case you did not know, until he moved to the Oak Park Arms a few months before his passing, Roland lived in a one-bedroom rental apartment!

Today we are honored to announce the distribution of the first annual income from his endowment given to the church. I would like to invite Mr. Tom Stewart, the Chairperson of our Endowment Committee, and Rev. Edgar Hiestand, the Chairperson of our Missions Committee, to come forward for the presentation of the Hubbard Mission Funds.

Now it is our moment to take up the story and live the call God has placed upon our lives. Now it is our moment to be courageous, loyal, and visionary. Now, it is our moment to pick up the mantle and claim prophetic authority as our own. May God grant us a clear vision! May God grant us a double portion of Elijah's and Roland's spirit! Let the congregation say, Amen!