

## **Sermon: Who Will Pick Up The Mantle?**

**By Rev. Sheryl Stewart**

**Hebrew Scriptures:** 2 Kings 17: 1-2, 6-14 **Epistle:** Galatians 5:1, 13-25

**Gospel:** Luke 9: 51-62

**Summary:** Elijah's mantle was a robe. Jesus' mantle is a Cross. Do we dare pick it up and follow Him?

The mantle of Elijah, his cloak, is used to part the Jordan River twice. It parts once as Elijah crosses with his student, Elisha. It parts again when Elisha returns without his teacher, having seen him ascend to heaven and having received God's gift of faith which will enable him to succeed his teacher.

However, the Jordan had parted long before when Joshua led the people of God into the Promised Land. At that time, the Law was read and the people made their choice: will this God be our God and will we be God's people. This is when Joshua said, "Decide as you will, but as for me and my house, we will choose God."

The Law being affirmed was given on Mount Zion, twice. The people broke faith before they even heard it the first time by

making a golden idol like the ones they knew in Egypt. Before this, the Red (or Reed) Sea had been parted so that these refugees might escape slavery in Egypt. So, before the Law was given, people had to personally decide: “Will God’s breath keep that wall of water back as we cross?” Once on the other side, Moses lowers his rod and – Whoosh! – The waters flow back, destroying the pursuing chariots and army of Egypt.

Now, the people look about and see many people who have made the same personal choice standing beside them. At this moment, they stop being persons of faith and become people of faith, a nation.

This decision was defined and refined by the Law, their descendants reaffirming that decision after the Jordan parting of the waters. So, that mantle of Elijah which Elisha picked up evokes a lot of memories. Elisha does well as he carries on. Even today, it is hard to tell where Elijah leaves off and Elisha begins.

This really should be the case with us and Jesus. Who succeeds Jesus and gets power from heaven on the day of Pentecost? Of course, those are the disciples, the apostles, the eyewitnesses. Who follow them, inspired by the same Holy Spirit, is it not those who believe their report?

Paul writes that what we pick up from Jesus, His mantle so to speak, is freedom. Not the freedom to do whatever we want, which would be a self-idolatry even more total than being bound to a golden calf. No, Jesus' freedom is seen in His heart of love and a life time of service to God.

In the Gospel lesson, we see Jesus refusing to destroy the infidels and refusing even the self-interest of comfort and safety. Those who follow Him choose God over security and even family. They are free, *not from, but for*, one thing: proclaiming the salvation from God in word and deed as does Jesus. If they do this right, it should be hard to tell where Jesus leaves off and they begin.

And from these, we come. We are free, not to be so great that we may exploit the infidel and command the resources of Creation for ourselves. No, we are free to let justice flow like a stream and righteousness like a river of living water that never runs dry: the theme of the annual meeting of our United Church of Christ held in Rochester a couple weeks ago.

It should be impossible to tell where God leaves off and Jesus continues. And, it should be just as hard to tell where Jesus leaves off and we continue. So, not as I will, but as God wills, so mote it be!