



Catalog No. 1730

2 Kings 2:1-18

7th Message

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March 6, 2011

PLANT SEQUOIAS

SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

My message this morning is entitled “Plant Sequoias.” This phrase comes from a poem by Wendell Berry entitled *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*. The poem is an indictment against living for the quick profit, the short-term gain that defines the way of our modern world. Berry calls us to live counter to the values of the world and live as disciples of Christ. These two ways of living are mutually exclusive. There are no points of intersection. Berry writes:

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.

The poem ends with the two words “practice resurrection.” Planting sequoias is a metaphor for investing in things that will remain for a very long time, far after you are gone. It means giving your life to things “that you will not live to harvest” but have eternal results. The picture you see is the avenue of 50 giant sequoias located at the Benmore Botanic Garden in Scotland. These giant sequoias were planted in 1863 and are currently 165 feet tall. They might live for 3500 years and reach a height of over 300 feet, the length of a football field.

Our study today focuses on the transition of spiritual leadership in Israel. In the world of sports one great player often follows another. Mickey Mantle succeeded Joe DiMaggio. Steve Young followed in the shoes of Joe Montana. Arnold Palmer gave way to Jack Nicklaus. It is also like this in business. Everyone is waiting to see who will succeed Steve Jobs at Apple. In the world of politics we see the same thing. In the recent movie, *The King's Speech*, King George VI's father is concerned about who will lead Great Britain when he dies. So it is in the church. Elijah planted a sequoia to follow him. His name was Elisha.

Elisha's Call

We first encounter Elisha in 1 Kings 19.

So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother good-by,” he said, “and then I will come with you.” “Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?” So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing

equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant. (1 Kings 19:19-21 TNIV)

Following the great victory on Mt. Carmel and Jezebel's subsequent death threat, Elijah had fled to Mt. Horeb. He considered himself a washed-up failure and a ministry drop out. Filled with self-pity, he complained to God and simply wanted to die. But God had other plans and gave him three assignments, one of which was to anoint Elisha. When he found Elisha plowing in the field he threw his cloak, or mantle, around him. This action indicated Elijah's call upon Elisha to follow him and succeed him as Israel's spiritual leader. The number twelve foreshadows Elisha's role in guiding the tribes of Israel as he has done with his oxen.

When Elisha requests to say good-bye to his parents, Elijah's response is not necessarily negative, as when Jesus tells the man who wanted to say good-bye to his family before he followed him: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62).” Kissing his parents symbolizes that Elisha is leaving home. Elijah tells him he is free to do what he wants. Elisha does more than say good-bye. He sacrifices a pair of oxen with the implements and feeds the people. Then he begins to serve, or minister to, Elijah – the same word used of Joshua's service to Moses (Ex. 24:13; Joshua 1:1).

What we see right at the outset is Elisha's eagerness and readiness to follow Elijah and become his disciple. He runs after him, and when he burns his plowing implements and sacrifices two of his oxen he is burning his bridges. He has counted the cost, and from this point forward there will be no turning back.

Elijah and Elisha Journey to the Jordan

We do not hear of Elisha again until 2 Kings 2 when Elijah is about to be taken up to heaven.

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elisha said to Elisha, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.”

But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel.

The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” Elisha replied, “so be quiet.”

Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.”

And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho.

The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” he replied, “so be quiet.”

Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.”

And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” (2 Kings 2:1-6b)

Elijah and Elisha take a journey from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan. Gilgal here is probably not the Gilgal where Israel first camped when they crossed the Jordan and came into the land. Rather this Gilgal was in the hills eight miles north of Bethel.

Bethel is associated with Ai, the second battle when Israel entered the land. Jericho is the sight of the first battle. The Jordan is where Israel entered the land. Thus we see that Elijah and Elisha are taking the reverse journey that Israel took when they began the conquest under Joshua’s leadership. One wonders if God is going to give up on his people and leave the land.

Again we see the repetition of three as we saw in our text last week. Three times Elijah tells Elisha to stay, and three times Elisha vows that he will never leave. They travel to three locations – Bethel, Jericho, and the Jordan. Again we see Elisha’s persistence and eagerness to follow. He knows that Elijah is going to depart and he knows that he is his successor.

Four times the sons of the prophets are referred to in this chapter. Like Elisha they know that Elijah is departing. When Elijah complained to God on Horeb that he was the only one left in Israel that was following him, God told him that he was wrong. The sons of the prophets are part of the 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. This is the fruit of Elijah’s ministry.

Even though Elijah had not eradicated Baal worship or turned Ahab’s heart to the Lord, he had started a revival movement. He became a spiritual father and established spiritual communities in several locations. Bethel was the location of one of the golden calves made by Jeroboam and thus one of the centers of Israel’s idol worship. Jericho was cursed and God declared that it was never to be rebuilt. But right in the middle of the idolatry and disobedience, spiritual communities had sprung up and true worship of Yahweh was taking place.

The sons of the prophets give us a wonderful picture of the church. We are the sons and daughters of the prophets. We are the “called out” people of God, one church meeting in thousands of local communities. And we are planted in an idolatrous world to offer true worship and faithfulness to the God of Jesus Christ. Even though we might be surrounded with evil and darkness we do not have to be discouraged. Elijah was not successful in leading a nationwide revival and we might not be either. We might not be able to change the views of our political leaders or get the legislation we would want, but that does not stop the kingdom of God. God is a missionary God. He is at work bringing eternal life to people for his namesake all over the world, among every tribe and every nation, establishing spiritual lighthouses and beachheads for his kingdom. This is the vision of the church and the purpose of missions. As René Dubos said “Think globally, act locally.” We might ask ourselves how God wants us to be part of this vision, whether in the Silicon Valley or somewhere in the heart of Africa.

Crossing the Jordan

So the two of them walked on.

Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped

at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. (2 Kings 2:6b–8)

What we see here is simultaneous action by fifty men and the two of them, Elijah and Elisha. As Elijah and Elisha approached the Jordan, fifty men stood some distance away watching with anticipation. As they watch, Elijah rolled up his mantle and struck the water. The water divided here and there and Elijah and Elisha crossed over on dry ground. We are reminded of Moses dividing the Red Sea with his staff and the people of Israel crossing on dry ground when they departed from Egypt. Israel had become like Egypt, absorbed in idolatry.

Elisha’s Request

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha,

“Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

“You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.” (2 Kings 2:9–10)

Here again we see the boldness and eagerness of Elisha in his request for a double portion (literally, *a double mouth*) of Elijah’s spirit. This is the portion given to the firstborn (Deut. 21:17). Elisha was very wise. He didn’t ask for fame or fortune but the means to continue Elijah’s ministry. As we will see in verse 12, Elisha calls Elijah his father and his request as a spiritual son means that Elisha will be the preeminent prophet. The double portion will be born out in the fact that Elisha does roughly twice the miracles that Elijah did (16 to 8 by one count). Solomon asked for wisdom, but this did not save Israel. Renewal does not depend on wisdom only, but also Spirit.

Elijah Ascends in Glory

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. (2 Kings 2:11–12)

The chariot of fire and horses of fire represent the presence and power of God. They were not intended to be Elijah’s mode of transportation to heaven, his limo ride so to speak, but rather a means of separating Elijah and Elisha. Four times in the text we see the phrase “the two of them.” Elisha vowed that he would never leave Elijah. Perhaps Elisha would have continued to cling to Elijah without the forced separation. Elisha tearing his garment into two pieces represents the separation.

Elijah ascended into heaven in a whirlwind, which is also symbolic of God’s presence (1 Kings 19:11; Job 38:1). Like Enoch, Elijah disappeared and was no more. But Elisha saw the chariots and horsemen of Israel, and thus we can anticipate that his request was granted. The phrase, “My father, my father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” was repeated by Israel’s king when Elisha was about to die (2 Kings 13:14). John Dryden comments on this scene in the closing lines of his satirical poem, *Mac Flecknoe*:

The Mantle fell to the young Prophet’s part,
With double portion of his Father’s art.¹

We are reminded of Joshua's separation from Moses when Israel entered the land. Moses was forced to stay behind, and he died in the Transjordan. Elijah was taken up to heaven in the Transjordan. We are also reminded of Jesus' separation from the disciples, but that separation was terribly severe. Prior to the ascension and giving of the Spirit was the agony of the betrayal and death on a cross.

Re-crossing the Jordan

He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. (2 Kings 2:13-14)

Elisha is now alone. He took Elijah's mantle and walked back towards the Jordan. When he reached the Jordan he struck the water in the same way that Elijah had done. We notice that he struck the water twice. It may well be that the first time nothing happened. Elisha may have been depending on the mantle, the visible sign of Elijah's power. He was simply imitating Elijah. But upon reflection, Elisha realized that he must depend on the same thing Elijah trusted in, the power of God. And so he asks, "Where is Yahweh, the God of Elijah?" He struck the water again and it divided.

This is a very important principle for us. We can tend to admire a leader and want to be like them. We can imitate what they do to have success, thinking that we will have the same result. This happens all the time in the church. Leaders copy what worked in one church, thinking it will have the same result in theirs. What we need to learn is that it is not the method or the man, but the Spirit and power of God.

David Roper writes: "Elisha's power did not lie in slavish imitation of his mentor. There was nothing in Elijah and peculiar to him that qualified him for the task that God had given him to do. There was no power in his mantle, his manner or his methods. The prophet's power was the power of the living God."²

Like Joshua crossing the Jordan, now Elisha reenters the land, symbolic of the fact that Elisha will lead a new conquest. Elisha is the son of his father, Elijah, empowered by the Spirit. God is alive and God is still working among his people. The lamp has not gone out. We are also reminded of Jesus, who was baptized in the Jordan by John. When Jesus came up from the water, a voice spoke from heaven: "this is my beloved son" and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove. Jesus was empowered to lead a new conquest. His conquest was to defeat the powers of darkness and evil, death and sin. Hopefully you can see the correspondences between Joshua, Elisha, and Jesus. Each name is in fact rooted in the idea of salvation.

The Reluctance to Let Go of Elijah

The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. "Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley." "No," Elisha replied, "do not send them."

But they persisted until he was too embarrassed to refuse. So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. When they returned to Elisha,

who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?" (2 Kings 2:15-18)

The fifty men from verse 7 perhaps saw the whirlwind but definitely saw the waters divide for Elisha. They recognize that the Spirit of Elijah now rested on Elisha. The transition of spiritual leadership has now taken place, but it is not fully acknowledged by the sons of the prophets. They are not ready to let go of Elijah. They plead with Elisha to go and look for Elijah. They are confused as to whether Elijah has died or has been transported to another place. Elisha tells the men to not bother, but finally he relents. When the men return after searching for three days, Elisha tells them, "I told you so."

Here we see a great truth about spiritual leadership within the church. God gives men and women to guide and lead the church. They are empowered by the Spirit to do the work of the Lord. But obviously there will be transitions in leadership due to age and illness. Each generation must come and go. The mantle must be passed. But there can be a reluctance of the people of God to let go of the old and embrace the new. There can be the reluctance of the leader to let another step into his or her shoes. We want to cling to the past and have things like they always have been. We want to hold on to men and women we admire. Again we see that it is not the person necessarily, but the Spirit that enables and empowers. This is what Elisha and the sons of the prophets had to learn and we do as well.

As the church we trust in the power of God, not the power of people. And so we can move through transitions in leadership knowing that God continues to provide and give direction from one generation to another. The history of the people of God is one generation passing on the mantle to the next generation; faithful service of God imparted to those who follow. It started with Abraham and will end when Christ comes again. This is one reason that a local church should never depend on the charismatic personality of just one leader. No one is indispensable. The only thing essential is God.

We have a great legacy in this regard at PBC Cupertino and Palo Alto. God raised up some faithful and gifted men and women in the late forties and they started a church. God provided some great leaders and preachers who have had tremendous influence here and around the world. But they recognized the value of training and discipling the next generation so that they would follow in their footsteps. This is the reason why PBC has continued in Cupertino, Palo Alto and now Willow Glen. As some of us now grow older, it is our turn to prepare the next generation. I often think about whom God will raise up to lead this church in the next ten years? And it is our responsibility as elders and pastors to train the men and women who will follow us. One day one of us might throw the mantle over your shoulder, and hopefully you are as ready as Elisha.

Chapter 2 actually is one literary unit, but we will stop here. We might take note of the chiasmic structure of verses 7-18 and note that Elijah's ascension in a whirlwind is the center of the text.³

- A Fifty men (7)
- B Elijah divides waters and two of them cross over (8)
- C Elisha requests spirit (9-10)
- D Chariot separates them (11a)
- X Elijah by whirlwind into heaven (11b)
- D' Elisha sees, calls to chariot, tears clothes (12)
- C' Elisha takes up mantle (13)
- B' Elisha divides waters of Jordan, crosses over (14)
- A' Fifty men (15-18)

The Call of God

There are so many things that we can reflect on in our text today, such as the correspondences between Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist; the correspondence between Joshua, Elisha and Jesus; the faithfulness of God to his people; spiritual community; spiritual leadership.

But what I would like is to have us reflect on is the correspondence between Joshua, Elisha and the disciples. Joshua, Elisha and the disciples were called by God and empowered by God to continue the work of their mentor. Joshua was a man with the Spirit (Num. 27:18). Elisha received a double portion of Elijah's Spirit. In the upper room Jesus told his disciples that when he left, they would receive the Holy Spirit and that "all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Jesus didn't mean the disciples would do more impressive miracles or more powerful works than he; Jesus meant the disciples would do vastly more of them: quantity, not magnitude.

In the same way that Moses called Joshua and Elijah called Elisha and Jesus called the disciples, we have been called by God and empowered with the same Spirit. We are disciples and, hopefully, we are ready to follow Jesus with the same readiness and eagerness that we see in Elisha. We leave the comforts of home and the pleasures of this world to follow the call of God on our lives.

What is the call of God? Os Guinness, in his book *The Call*, tells us, "Our primary calling as followers of Christ is by him, to him, and for him. First and foremost we are called to Someone (God), not to something (such as motherhood, politics, or teaching) or to somewhere (such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia). Our secondary calling, considering who God is as sovereign, is that everyone, everywhere, and in everything should think, speak, live, and act entirely for him."⁴

Our secondary calling includes things like our career, ministry, and place of residence, but it flows from our primary calling. The order is essential. If our secondary calling comes first, then we will be what we do. If the order of priority is correct then we will do what we are. As Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote in his poem, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, "What I do is me: for that I came." When our identity

is firmly founded in God, then we listen carefully to the specific ways that God is calling us to minister and care for people. Many times this secondary call might be to things that seem ordinary and mundane but the Spirit of God transforms them into life-changing moments. As we gain awareness of our gifts and talents we get a sense of how God uses us in this world, and that is independent of our job title. All of us are called to a particular place, at a particular time, for a particular purpose.

I know that God called me to be a pastor as a secondary calling. I actually had hints of this call when I was very young. I took a detour for many years, but then I started responding to that call while I was an engineer. I made several key choices in order to follow this call long before I became a full-time pastor. But the title "engineer" or "pastor" does not define this calling. I would actually be doing the same thing, using the same gifts, ministering to people in the same way, even if I had continued to be an engineer.

How are you responding to God's call on your life? No matter what we do and no matter where we live we are to invest in the things that matter to God. We denounce the world's ways and invest in things with eternal significance, things that remain for a long time. We may never see the fruit of our labors, but that is okay. We are simply faithful in the generation of which we are a part. We plant sequoias that live far beyond our lifetime.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

¹ John Dryden, *Mac Flecknoe: A Satyr Upon the True-Blew-Protestant Poet*, T.S.

² David Roper, e-musing, <http://davidroper.blogspot.com>.

³ Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) 175-176.

⁴ Os Guinness, *The Call*, (Word Publishing: Nashville, London, Vancouver, Melbourne; 1998) 31.