

There's this farmer named Elisha (with the "sh") out doing his work, plowing his field, in the spring of, let's say, 849 B.C. He's trying to manage a team of 24 oxen on a clear, cloudless day—there's been a long drought in the land, but the farmers like Elisha keep doing what they can, hoping, waiting, praying, staying ready for when it rains again. He's trying to hold onto the oxen ahead of him, dust swirling up around his feet, sweat running down his brow, fully focused on the furrow ahead.

Suddenly he feels the weight of someone's mantle—an outer cloak people used to wear back then—thrown over his shoulders. What's this? He looks around and sees the great man of God, the famous prophet Elijah! (spelled with a "j") Everyone knows the great Elijah: just a day or two before this he has called down fire from heaven by the power and in the name of the one true God of Israel, defeating the 850 prophets dedicated to the cult of the false gods Baal and Asherah in the very public contest atop Mt Carmel, about 60 miles away. Everyone knows about Elijah and Queen Jezebel—she's the champion of Baal, plotting and planning, ambitious to subvert the faith of Israel, and she was humiliated. All those 850 (against the one, Elijah) were on her public payroll. Her swift response was to put out a contract on his life: Elijah is a marked man wherever he goes. His days are numbered.

Although he's totally surprised, Elisha knows just exactly what this mantle thrown around his shoulders means. What an incredible honor...and what an incredible hassle. Have you ever had that feeling—Wow! What an incredible honor that Jesus, the Savior of the world and the One to whom you owe everything good you will ever do or become—Jesus has called you to be His apprentice, His personal attaché, His follower, to serve on His team? (Of course it's also a monumental hassle, depending how you look at it—nothing will ever be the same because now you belong, body and soul, heart mind and spirit, entirely to Him, and the chief end of your life is to serve Him first, and to enjoy Him forever...)

One of the odd details in this account: Elisha feels that mantle, startled out of his mind, and looks up. Just in time to see the back of this famous man, Elijah, walking away from him! Elijah is not sticking around to beg or whine or plead with him. (For one thing, Elijah has no time to lose, and for another, God has not treated Elijah this way. This man of faith knows God, and the ways of God!) Elisha has to leave his oxen loose right there in the middle of the "front 40" and run after Elijah just to catch up to him! And this is not Elisha's fault—he didn't ask for any of this. He gets up, has his breakfast that morning...he's just some guy out tilling his soil, minding his own business...and the next thing he knows he has a cloak dumped on his shoulders and he looks up to see only the back of the famous prophet of God, walking away from him.

Can you imagine how he must have felt in that instant? "Hey, wait a minute! The great Elijah—is that you? But why me? What would you, the great Elijah—the most courageous champion of Israel, of the one true God—want with me, a simple farmer out plowing his fields? Elijah—why would you choose me, Elisha, to take on and mentor for the highest position in the land of Israel? Why are you offering me, of all people, a position as next-in-line-great-prophet-of-God? Hey, can't you wait a minute? Can we talk? What's the salary? What's the training program? When would I start? [Have you

talked this over with H.R.?) Where are we going to go first? A million questions flooded into Elijah's head in that moment, and he probably couldn't ask a single one.

(How do you usually experience God's calling you into a new venture, a new chapter? How does the Holy Spirit call to you? God does not whine or beg. The Holy Spirit of God can be both subtle and insistent—there's this still, small voice which may start somewhere in the back of your mind (of course you hear it in exactly the same voice—yours—as all the other thoughts going on in there all the time) which will not go away—at least it will not go away and stay away, and leave you in peace. You try to ignore it, and you succeed for a while—but back it keeps coming: “It's time to give up this relationship, this unhealthy habit.” “You cannot keep running from this—see how it's bringing you down.” “I really need you to step up: My church is hampered from being effective, and you could do this. I promise. Give it a try.” If you ignore it long enough, it goes away and eventually, if you get good enough at it (in what the Bible used to call “hardness of heart”) the voice of the Spirit may stay away—but that isn't good. You just died a little, and it's only going to be that much harder and more painful for you for God to bring you back again to new life later on. (Besides, the voice of the enemy will give you no rest, and now you're only hearing from one side—this isn't good either!)

Sometimes the call of the Spirit of God is an urgent cry, as was Elijah's call to Elisha. (Silent, but urgent!) Elijah didn't have much time; he needed a successor now! God's timing is not necessarily ours because God sees the bigger picture when we don't; sometimes God needs a response from you *now*! (Two weeks ago for the Independence Day sermon I mentioned some of the long and arduous process leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the apparent deadlock the delegates to the Continental Congress faced. I am confident the Holy Spirit of God was appealing very urgently to Caesar Rodney of Delaware, because God had urgent business which needed to be done—a nation to be born—and it could not happen without a unanimous vote of the 13 colonies, and this one delegate was the only one who could break the tie in the Delaware delegation, on of the four undecided or still against. He was roused and motivated sufficiently to leave his home in Dover, 89 miles from Philadelphia, when the messenger arrived at 2:00 am, in the middle of a horrendous summer storm. He took his best horse and started out, aware that the debate would begin in less than seven hours. There could be no change of horses until after dawn; the only road was a washed-out quagmire so muddy in places that Rodney had to get off his horse and both slowly walk lest the horse wind up crippled. Finally he made it, being carried into the meeting hall just in time for the final vote at 1 p.m. When he spoke for and voted for independence, the delegates for the other three undecided colonies did likewise, and the Declaration was signed.)

The Spirit speaks to us differently at different times, depending on what is needed, just as you do to people whom you love. Is your child about to wander into traffic? That requires one voice. Is your lover falling asleep? Is your best friend bearing a heavy burden, and needing to talk? Is your Congress about to pass a horrendous new law? One tone, one size, one voice, does not fit all. We may hear Jesus calling to us thru His Spirit during prayer. Sometimes we, like Elisha, get an obvious personal invitation from a messenger straight from God. We may hear something on the radio or TV; sometimes it's what seems like an idle thought out of the blue that rings true, awakens us, and we recognize that though as a gift from God. When you meet with your mentor;

when men get together for discipleship, as iron sharpens iron; when someone shares truly from the heart in your small group and encouragement may come. When you are studying the Scriptures, and a passage, a thought, a new understanding jumps out at you and won't leave you alone. So many different ways the Spirit of God calls to us. (And many of us heard an eloquent reminder from Mary Anderson last Sunday: if we have stopped hearing the Voice of the Master calling to us, it's probably time to lighten our schedule, turn down the activity level and the "volume" of our lives, and waste a little more time with God.)

How are you hearing from the Spirit these days?
What has God been trying to tell you lately?

When Elisha catches his breath and pulls himself together he acts decisively "Elijah! Wait a minute! Yes! I accept your offer! Just let me say good-bye to my family—then I'll come with you. OK?" Elijah says, "OK. I'm not stopping you." (Elijah didn't have to say much; who he was said it all.)

And Elisha gets the picture, alright. He understands: the invitation to follow the great prophet of God is a totally-life-changing, once-for-all opportunity. He will never be the same, and he won't be needing to be a farmer again. Elisha is immediately committed to his new life, his "vocatio"! He figuratively burns his bridges back to his former way of life; he literally takes off the wooden yokes and burns them, then invites the town to enjoy the oxen barbeque. (I guess he's not planning to return to the farming life any time soon.) He is committed to the new future Elijah is offering! (Maybe you've heard the old quip about the two farmers enjoying their bacon and eggs breakfast. "Do you know the difference between being involved and committed?" "No." "The hen is involved; the pig is committed.")

"Then Elisha followed Elijah, and became his disciple." [v 21] Nine centuries before Jesus began calling His disciples, this was about as close as you could come. Elisha hears the sudden call of the great prophet, drops what he's doing, resolves right then and there never to look back, and follows him into a totally new and different future. He doesn't understand it, he doesn't feel worthy, he has no way of knowing what the new God-directed future will bring, he doesn't know where his next meal or paycheck is coming from—but he totally trusts in God, and in this man of God calling him. He knows deep within, in that moment, that his unanticipated future following Elijah is worth more than all his oxen, all his security, all his anticipated future following the status quo and the tidy life he had foreseen for himself. (I know it would not be technically true to call Elisha a model Christian, with the gap of nine centuries and all, but you all know what I mean.)

When we hear stories like this, it's not always obvious how to translate them into our own lives. So what are we supposed to do: sell off our cars and our home and liquidate all our assets, all we have, give the proceeds to the poor, and then trust in the kindness of strangers, or the Church, or the welfare system? Probably not—but it always depends, doesn't it? If you are called by the Holy Spirit of God to do just that, if that's what it takes to get you free of the entanglements which prevent you from being His follower and nothing less drastic will set you free to be able to become a disciple of Jesus—then woe be to you if you remain "sensible" and try to play it safe. Woe be to you or me whenever we ignore or disobey the call of the living God. Maybe we think

we're not up to it, maybe we think we're not courageous enough, not talented enough, maybe we think God has called the wrong person, maybe we're focusing on what we'd lose rather than what we'll gain. Doesn't matter: the only way to true security, to a life that matters, to becoming fully alive, is to obey.

(Remember that creepy dark scene toward the end of *Return of the King* when Frodo gets caught in those sticky clinging superstrong spiderwebs, there he is hanging off the ground, and the more he tries to wriggle free the more hopelessly entangled he becomes? Jesus looks at our clinging to our possessions, clinging to our apparent "security," to our desire for familiarity, our desire to remain in total control of our lives as so just many of those spiderwebs—because Jesus is always seeing us in an eternal perspective, who we will be a hundred, a thousand years from now (in our earth time.) We trim our focus down to a myopic range: how am I going to make it thru the week? The school year? How can I make it safely to age 59½, or 65, or 72, and retirement?

This is a dilemma for Christians. Elijah was presumably being as faithful that morning, before Elijah found him, as he was the next morning, on the road together. There was nothing wrong with his being a farmer—on the contrary, he was doing what he was supposed to do, or his family would starve. If you have been faithful, then your current responsibilities are God-given ones. But the challenge is to keep listening, to keep obeying, to keep moving forward in our lives—not to keep clinging today to the assignment God gave me 20 years ago. Are there God-opened doors I have failed to walk thru because I didn't trust in God? Are there new levels of commitment, or service, of discipline, or stewardship, or responsibility, or hospitality to which I have said "no" because I am entangled in the old spiderwebs, the stale, old, by now on "autopilot" and unchallenging assignments? The main thing isn't whether I'm a lowly farmer or an exalted prophet. The main thing is what is God calling me to do and to be from this day? What is the mantle God is putting around my shoulders this day?

But there's still the other side of the dilemma. Elisha is no fool. He does not write the script, play the hero, kill off all his oxen to show God how trusting he is, then wait for God's invitation for him to be the next High Prophet in all the land like the child in kindergarten frantically waving her hand, "choose me, choose me!") Elijah, the man of God speaking for God, has called him. He has faithfully, boldly, said "Yes" to that call. (And Elisha does not have to imagine all this, bring it into being by virtue of his own resolve. No—Elisha is simply plowing away, being responsible, doing what he's supposed to be doing, when God, in the person of Elijah, finds him, calls him.) It costs him everything, and gains him everything. Next week we'll learn more about what Elisha gains—but in brief, he ends up having more miracles attributed to him than anyone in the Bible behind Jesus. But God has called him, not vice versa. God has called Elisha to do what God needs done.

The Holy Spirit knows you inside and out, just as the Spirit knew that Elisha was precisely the right man to carry on the prophetic work of Elijah. Elisha may not have known it, but God sure did. God will not call you to do more than you can do—but God is not content for any of us to stagnate, to remain spectators when it's only as players, actors, actresses accepting our part in the divine drama that we can grow into who we were created to be. We grow in the eternal ways as we devote our lives and talents to God's eternal purposes.

Later this week some of our young people and adults will be going again to the Door of Faith orphanage, and this time specifically to help with construction of the new Christian day care center about a mile away. (Thank you, Joe and Mary and the Mission Committee for organizing this opportunity!) Daniel and Heidi, directors of this new center, have said “yes” to God. Daniel grew up as an orphan in Mexico, and Jesus has redeemed his fears and anger into a fierce desire to serve other orphans in His name. Heidi met the young man Daniel while visiting an orphanage with her Youth Group, and they were married a few years ago. They sold what little they had, moved to this tiny out of the way town no one in their right minds would choose to move to apart from the will of God and the satisfaction we all know which comes when we say “Yes” to the Spirit. They have heard God calling them to show the love of Jesus to desperate families and single mothers of little children around La Mision who cannot afford day care and yet cannot afford not to go to work. I presume they have heard correctly: God has called them to get this Day Care started—they have obeyed, and they’re off to a great start. They’ve already given all they had, and they’re already spending all their time. God is now calling others to help with the drywall and the painting and the funding and the prayers. God has a mission to perform; God calls everyone from the lowliest workerbees to the Executive Directors to help perform it.

You know this is exactly how Christ’s Church functions. The Spirit of Jesus is calling some to step forward into the most visible roles, and others into the more invisible, unnoticed roles. Some hear dramatic calls, like Elisha did, to step up and become an extraordinary prophet and miracle-worker for God. Some, like Elijah, are called to extend the invitation. God has a place of service for the Director and for the diaper-changer and for every role in between.

None of us showed up here, or got curious, or interested, or committed, or covenanted, by accident. Who was your Elijah? How did the Holy Spirit get your attention, and make clear how you were to move ahead into a different future? How did you wind up here that first Sunday morning, or for maybe in that first small group? (For a few of you this morning is perhaps the very first time; for others it was 20 and 30 and 40 years ago. For us Fishers it was six years ago.)

We already have a Youth Ministry Team Leader—it’s Mary, and she is doing great work with our young people! God is not calling anyone else to be the Leader—but I suspect God is calling others of us to support Mary—not as only Mary can do—but according to what you can do. She could always use workerbees to help plan and drive and chaperone—Bob O’Neill and others are going kayaking in the Back Bay this Wednesday with our young people—as well as sisters and brothers willing to pray for direction and discernment for our Youth Ministry. We have a very dedicated Bd of Christian Education, and many wonderful and devoted teachers these Sunday mornings. But some of them are ready for a well-earned break. They could use reinforcements. Is God calling you to step forward?

Several of our newest members have shared with us how many of you were so very friendly back when they first worshiped with us—terrific! (We pastors always love to hear this sort of feedback!) But it’s also true that our chair of the Evangelism Committee is laid up with a broken wrist, and I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a church with too many active members on the Evangelism Committee. Do you also believe God is leading us into a new season in the life of this congregation—after we have so

abundantly received, and been so richly taught and nurtured and blessed—to be bearing new fruit and expand?

When Trish and I moved to Berkeley in 1988 we worshiped with the local Evangelical Covenant Church one Sunday. Following the Service, David and Lucia Gill, total strangers, invited us to brunch with them. We weren't ready morning, but the following Sunday they remembered us and invited us to join a number of their friends for brunch afterward, which we did. They had never seen us before, but we've been friends with them ever since. In Jesus' name they welcomed us into a new spiritual home.

Is the Spirit calling to your attention your own Elishas, friends of yours (or people you don't yet even know) who maybe look as if they've got all they can handle, tilling their own fields, raising own their families and trying to make a living—just waiting to hear how God has a marvelous new dimension to their lives, an unfamiliar new future? I hope you're paying attention to that still small voice...ready, as Elisha himself did, to say "I don't fully understand it, why you've chosen me, but my answer is "Yes"!")

Elijah didn't randomly go out and choose Elisha, and Elisha did not randomly say "yes." God was in it, all the way on both ends: in the calling and in the accepting the invitation. Don't ever say "Yes" or "No" unless God is in it. But if God is calling you—into something as dramatic as working miracles and uprooting your life and walking away this day from everything you have ever known and trusted in, or into something as ordinary as offering to teach Sunday School or help with Hospitality on a Sunday morning on the patio, or something in between like spending a few days in La Mision sweating and painting and laughing for God—woe be to you if you try to ignore it.

The excitement, the eternal fulfillment, keeps coming when we keep saying "yes" to what God is calling us into not yesterday, not in 1988, not when we bought the oxen—but this and each new moment.

1 Kings 19:19-21

So [the prophet Elijah] set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him.

Elisha left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah said to him, "Go ahead back again; for what have I done to stop you from doing that?"

Then Elisha returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his disciple.