

A MODEL FOR TRANSITION I Kings 19:15-21

There are examples of leadership transition in the Bible from which we can learn. There are also a number of goodbyes from leaders to their people from which we can learn and be challenged. I want to incorporate several of these in the message today and next Sunday.

Transitions are inevitable. They are normal. They are inevitable in many cases because of health issues, death, aging and the dynamic of change. For example, Joshua was nearing his death when he gave his farewell speech to Israel. Paul in saying his farewell to the Ephesian Elders knew that he was on his way to Rome via Jerusalem eventually to be executed. I remember years ago in a former church when we began to use computers in the office, I had some secretaries decide to retire. They simply did not want to learn the computer. So, there was a transition of people because of the matter of change.

Transitions are also normal and to be expected because God uses different people for different purposes and for different times. God oversees His Kingdom's work and not only chooses those that He will use but when and how He will use them. For example, God chose Moses for the time of the Exodus and leadership in the wilderness. He chose Joshua for the conquest and settlement in the land. Each was assigned a tour of duty with God orchestrating the assignments. Each person has a leg of the relay to run and God determines the sequence in which each one runs.

Now, we have come to our transition here at Carmel. Unlike Moses, I am not 120 years old. Unlike Joshua, I am not dead yet. Unlike Paul, I am not facing the imminent threat of execution. But we are at a point where God has chosen a servant, a successor, for the next leg of the journey.

Today, I want to talk about our transition and, as I do, I want to focus on the transition between Elijah and Elisha, for there are some great lessons in that story for us. The stories of these two prophets are found in the Book of Kings. I want to share with you one portion of the scriptural narrative that specifically deals with the transition that God is orchestrating between the two.

Here is the passage:

The Lord said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

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. The he set out to follow Elijah and become his attendant" [1 Kings 19:15-21].

Elijah was the prophet whom God used to announce the drought of Israel. He was the one whom God used to confront Ahab the king. He was the one who oversaw the slaughter of the prophets of Baal and Asherah who were on Jezebel's payroll. He was the one who fled in fear from Jezebel's threats. It was at the mountain of Horeb, where he was in retreat, that God appeared to him. God spoke to him in a "gentle whisper" and spoke to him about several things, one of which was a transition plan. God was teaching Elijah a great lesson, and that lesson was that God's work does not end. There is continuity in God's work. It continued beyond those who went before us to us and continues on after us to others. His work is broader and greater than any one person. One chapter follows another, and with the transition to

another chapter there is usually a transition in personnel. That should be obvious to all of us, but is something that we need to be reminded of. God is in charge of transitions.

I began our transition process more than a year and one-half ago. I actually had talked about it prior to that but began transition talk in earnest more than 18 months ago with our Elders. I talked to a number of pastors and churches that had gone through retirement transitions after a lengthy pastorate—not resignations—but retirement transitions. I learned that having a transition plan increased the chances of a successful transition. Then I let the Elders do their research and they came to the same conclusion. Consequently together, we put before you a transition plan that we have followed since the beginning of 2011. The plan allowed me to remain as pastor while the search for a new pastor was conducted. I knew that the total process would probably take 18 months, so that is why we began it when we did. And here we are 18 months later at the point of transition. God is so good. Thank you for letting me be your pastor and your interim.

Most churches do not do it this way. Carmel is not like most churches. I knew we could do this well and do it to the glory of God. And we have and will. Having a pastor leave and a new one come in a close time frame is not usually done. It is risky. In fact, when we thought the process was going to go on for several more months I had decided to end my ministry here in October and build in a buffer of a number of months. But God began to open doors in a remarkable way and now we are here at transition time. We are going to do this well and show that this body of believers knows how to do a biblical transition.

Now, let's continue with the teaching here in this passage. When the predecessor is ready to leave, God knows who the successor is. God has already made His choice. He tells Elijah to go and anoint Elisha. Elijah didn't know his successor until God told him. Elisha was God's choice. Elijah was sent to "find" him, indicating divine guidance.

This has been our process here at Carmel. We knew all along that God makes the decision on the successor. He is the One Who knows the future. He is the One supreme over His church. He is the One Who knows the script for the next leg of the race. We simple are to "find" the person that God has chosen. We have done that through your committee who has labored in the search on our behalf. They served as our "Elijahs."

There is something interesting here in the text. It is a statement that emphasizes the continuity of God's work. In addition to telling Elijah to find and anoint Elisha, God told Elijah to go and anoint Jehu, the son of Nimshi, king over Israel. Elijah never anointed Jehu. That happened through Elisha at a later time [2 Kings 9]. Here is the lesson—when it involves God's agenda the work of the predecessor continues on with the successor.

We are not done with discipleship. We are not done with being on mission. We are not done with telling the Story. We are not done with planting churches and expanding the witness of our Lord. That work continues from one to another. What God told Elijah to do was carried out by Elisha. There will be different work but there is continuity of work as well. These areas of ministry will be strengthened and enhanced. Elijah rejoiced that Elisha would carry on the mission of God and what he longed to see for Israel. And I rejoice in what the new pastor will continue here.

Then the text says that Elijah went and found Elisha [v. 19]. He was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen. God calls people who know how to work. He calls people whose hands have been set on the plow.

Again, here you note a difference between the role of Elijah and Elisha. Elijah had announced a drought. Now, he finds Elisha plowing a field where there were servants plowing with 11 yoke of oxen and he, himself, was driving the 12th pair. This is the picture of great fruitfulness. You are going to see that. God is going to give a great harvest in this place. The fields have been and will be plowed with that expectation.

When Elijah found Elisha he threw his cloak—his outer garment—on him. That act symbolized the choice of God and the adoption of Elisha by Elijah. It was symbolic of his call. The man God chose

did not take the cloak but had the cloak thrown on him. He didn't seek the role. He was chosen by God and found.

You have heard the excitement of the PSC in sharing with us the person that they "found" with God's direction. Their excitement comes from having talked with the candidate, learning about the candidate, being with the candidate, seeing the ministry of the candidate, etc. They know so much more about him than we do at this point. And what they know excites them. They are excited about God's choice. The same is true for me. I am thrilled with the man that God has chosen and is sending to us. He doesn't need my cloak, but he certainly has my adoption.

After Elijah threw his cloak over Elisha, he apparently left. That seems to be the case, because Elisha had to run and catch up to him. The text doesn't indicate that Elijah even said anything to Elisha. He just threw his cloak over him. But Elisha would have known who Elijah was and knew what the cloak meant. Elisha had a decision to make. Would he say "yes" or "no"? He had to decide if he were going to leave what he was doing and what he had known and follow or remain doing what he was doing. His answer was "yes" to God's call of a new challenge.

Then he asked to go back and kiss his mother and father before he followed Elijah. At first this sounds like the request that one made of Jesus when Jesus asked him to follow Him [Luke 9:59-60]. And Jesus rebuked the one who made the request. But the situations are different. The one who said that to Jesus asked that he have the time to go and bury his father. But his father wasn't dead. He wanted to keep doing what he was doing until his father died. It was an excuse. He was not ready to pay the cost of following.

It was completely different with Elisha. He was ready and fully committed. That was evident when he killed the oxen and broke up the wooden plows and used the wood to cook the oxen. There was a severance from what he was presently doing to follow God's call on his life. But there was pain in that severance and he wanted to have time to say goodbye.

There is pain in parting. That is true for the pastor coming and for me as I leave. But all of that comes in a commitment to follow the Lord's leading. It is part of the process. But it is right to take time for the goodbyes.

As you read on in the text and even into the Book of Second Kings, you find Elijah and Elisha ministering together. We don't know how long that lasted, but it went on for a while.

When we adopted our transition plan we included the provision in the plan for an overlap of the new pastor with me if that were needed or desired. It was simply a possible provision. There are few reasons that would make that necessary or desirable. I certainly was not planning on an overlap. But, we included it just in case. There is no reason for that in our present situation. But what I want to point out to you from this text is that as Elijah and Elisha ministered together they were best friends. Elisha was a great blessing to Elijah. Later when Elijah is ready to be taken to heaven in a chariot of fire [not a bad set of wheels], Elisha referred to Elijah as "father"—he called out, "My father, My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel." Now, I am not old enough to be the father of the new pastor. But I anticipate the relationship being special as we have opportunity to know one another. Even though there will be no overlap, I know that we will become best friends.

God has been good to us and we need to acknowledge that. He is to be praised for His blessings to us and His leading us through this process. He is at work and the unfolding of His plan continues. In that process there are transitions. Transitions are necessary and okay. They can bring greater blessing. Even when Jesus made His transition from earth to heaven, He said that it was necessary for Him to go so that the Holy Spirit could begin His ministry. That brought greater blessing. Transitions can be good. This transition is good. Let's handle it well to the glory of God.