

## **1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19:19-21; 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 2:8-15 “When Left Behind is Good”**

In the Catholic Tradition, November 1<sup>st</sup> is “The Feast of Saints” or “All Saints Day.” That’s why we call October 31<sup>st</sup> “Halloween” ... it’s a contraction of “All Hallow’s Eve” ... the day before the saints are hallowed, or honored. We don’t have mid-week services here at FCC and the only thing we had on Tuesday was Board Meeting, so that’s why we wait until the Sunday after Halloween to remember the saints who died this year. And we had a lot of saints pass on to their heavenly reward as you could tell from the list Tom read.

While it’s on my mind, and since Tom is the one who came up with this idea when he served as pastor, if you haven’t filled out one of these memorial service planning guides, I’d like you to consider doing so. It sure helps when it comes to planning a person’s memorial service. Some folks, like Elizabeth Stolp, plan things out to the letter. Others say, “Y’know, so long as you sing this song or read this scripture, do whatever feels right.” By filling this out, you get to have a say in what sort of legacy you want to hand down to the folks who remain. And legacy is exactly what I want to talk about today.

I remember back in high school, there was a commercial for a brand of frozen pizza called “Tombstone.” The commercial on TV was clever ... the ad slogan was, “What do you want on your tombstone?” So my youth leader, Sean, decided that this would be a great discussion starter for a lesson about death and dying. So he asked us, “What would you want on your tombstone?” Even though we were only teenagers at the time, he said that it’s never too early to think about how we want people to remember us.

I know people who make videos throughout their life to pass on to their descendants. Others write memoirs. In this age of social media, people on FaceBook seem to have a running legacy page going on anyway. Every now and then I’ll visit Jan Evans’ page and see where someone posts something on her wall like, “Miss you sweet lady” or something

like that. Writings, photos, and movies are all fine and good. The way I want to talk about legacy transcends all of that. What can we pass on to our successors that's more than just words or things?

My favorite story that I think best illustrates this is Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab, which was around the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Prophets during this era were sort of the super-heroes of the Jewish tradition. "Elijah" is the Anglicized pronunciation of Eliahu means, "My God is Jahu/Yahweh." Elijah was famous for his dramatic power encounters with the prophets of Ba'al. We sometimes anglicize that one and say, "Bale" instead. So most of the stories written about Elijah had to do with miracles that made Ba'al look pretty feeble compared to Yahweh. And I like Elijah because he was kind of a smart aleck sometimes. One time he challenged the Ba'al worshippers to a barbeque cook-off. Okay, it was more complicated than that, and it's a sermon for another day. But anyway, the Canaanite prophets were trying to get Ba'al to reign down fire to consume this animal sacrifice that had been laid out on an altar. But they weren't having any luck! So while these other prophets and sorcerers were carrying on trying to get this fire going, Elijah said, "What's the matter guys? Where's the fire? Did Ba'al have to go ... 'relieve' himself? Do we need to wait for a better time?" So yeah, here was this popular, smart-alecky prophet who had built this amazing legacy of heroic encounters with these false gods and enemies of Israel. As he grew older, it became apparent that he needed to find someone who could carry on his prophetic ministry. So God led him to this young farmer who was out plowing his field one day. His name? His name was Elisha. The name sounds similar, right? It's easy to get them confused, especially with the way we pronounce those names in English. Elisha's name means, "My God is salvation."

So how did Elijah choose his new apprentice? Verse 19 says, he "passed by him and threw his mantle over him." Anyone know what a "mantle" is? It's a cloak. Or ... a cape. Remember how I said that prophets during this time were seen as sort of "super heroes?" It would

be like Superman passing through town and throwing his cape over the new kid. Notice Elisha didn't question this. He got up, said goodbye to his family, sacrificed his oxen to God, hosted a meal with the meat and followed Elijah to learn what it means to be a hero prophet. He got to be the "Robin" to Elijah's "Batman." But then we skip over to 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 2 when Elijah's time as prophet is ending.

Here's where we see Elijah getting ready to be taken up to heaven on a fiery chariot. There they were on the banks of the Jordan River in the presence of this 50 member "company of prophets." And here comes Elisha, standing before his mentor for the last time. Elijah says, "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken away from you." Well, Elisha already has the cape. He's got the backing of this 50 member "League of Super Prophets." What else could he ask for? Prophets were known for their frugal ways. So Elisha gives his answer. He said, "Give me a double share of your spirit."

And that makes sense, doesn't it? Because when we're talking about someone's "spirit" we're not talking "Casper the Friendly Ghost" are we? Elisha's not asking for Elijah's ghost to follow him around to be his helper, right? No, when someone says that they want a double portion of someone's spirit, you're asking for some of that moxie that helps you stand up to the Prophets of Ba'al when they're trying to intimidate you or pick fights with you about whose god is the mightiest! Give me some of that brash confidence that prompted you to say, "Hey, what's up guys? Did your God have to go take a nap or something ... 'cause I don't see any evidence he's been here!" Or worse yet, "What's the matter y'all? No Ba'als today?" See, even as we speak, I'm channeling the spirit of my salty old clergy-mentor Jack Musick because that guy *would actually say something like that* in church from the pulpit!" Of course, he'd say, "Boy, I got 14 months 'til I retire ... I'm gonna speak *truth* ... what are they gonna do, fire me?"

I regret that I was out of state on a non-refundable plane ticket when Jack was buried in 2005. I would have loved to hear stories of the other

ministers he mentored. I would have loved to hear if he called *them* “boy” too, or if he spoke some of the same words of wisdom that he spoke to me. Jack has been dead for going on 12 year now, but I had quite a few conversations with him in my head during my silent times this summer. That’s not the only time I hear him either. If my guard is down, and I’m not paying attention to what’s going on, you may hear me say, “I know, I know, you told me that would happen.” That’s *Jack’s* spirit. So maybe in that way it *is* a little bit like having Casper the Friendly Ghost tagging along helping me when I’m feeling like a fraud and don’t know what I’m doing. That’s when Jack says, “Boy, *everyone* in ministry feels like a fraud sometimes. If you *don’t* feel like a fraud, you ain’t doing your job right or you just forgot who you’re working for.”

What do you want on your tombstone? What do you want people to remember about you? What do you want folks to inherit should they desire a double portion of *your* spirit? A double portion of diligence? A double portion of courage? A double portion of kindness ... gentleness ... patience? I wonder if we even think that our words or actions will even be remembered. I always get a kick out of people who I haven’t seen in a long time say, “I remember something you said or something you wrote a long time ago” and then they’ll tell me what they think I said or wrote, and I’ll smile and nod and think, “Now *what?* I don’t remember writing that.” A high school classmate who I didn’t know terribly well wrote me last Spring and told me how she remembered playing in these tunnels that were made out of concrete storm drain pipes ... sort of like the ones down here at Caper Acres. She said, “I was playing by myself, and this older kid who I always felt uncomfortable around started saying things to me that made me really scared, and you came around and chased him off. I never quite knew how to say thanks, so here it is ... thank you for being courageous and sticking up for me.” And I’m thinking, “That was 43 years ago! I don’t remember that, and I’ve never really considered myself a courageous person *at all!*” But my friend finally coaxed the memory out of me, and all I could remember was saying, “Jeez Eddie, just leave her alone.”

And he walked away. That's it! No big deal. No heroics. No power encounter. But for my friend, in that moment of fear and vulnerability, just saying those words ... words that I would have said to *anybody* who was making *any* girl cry ... it was a big deal. And that was cool and all, and I felt really good when she told me that story, but I had to think, "There have been plenty of times in my life when my words and actions *caused pain*." Sometimes it wasn't intentional. Sometimes it was *very* intentional. And as *you've* probably experienced, the memories of times you hurt people can haunt you for a long time. Your words and your actions, whether you like it or not ... for better or for worse ... make a difference. They're a part of the legacy you build.

Today we remember our saints who've passed on ... and not just the ones from this past year that Tom read at the beginning of the service. For *all* the saints ... from the past *and* the present here among the priesthood of all believers. You may think our pews are only ½ full today, but believe me, there's standing room only when you take into account the souls of those who have built upon this church's ministry over the last 120+ years.

Okay, so what about Elisha? What did he do after Elijah granted his request, and he received that affirmation of the Company of Prophets: "Yes, the Spirit of Elijah now rests upon Elisha." Where did he go? What did he do? Well ... he performed a couple of miracles, as you'd expect ... then on his way to Bethel, some small boys came out on the road and made fun of Elisha because he was bald. So Elisha cursed the kids and a mama bear came out of the woods and mauled them to death. And Katy has a great sermon about that for another day ... or at least she had a good Bible study on that passage a couple of years ago, so I will pass that cape on to Katy and let her deal with that story at another time. With that, I'll say, "The word of God for the People of God" and let's move on!