

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Elisha: Reinvented Wheels”

**Dr. Jay Howell**

October 8, 2023

I'm grateful to Balajied Khylllep, who joined us last Sunday for World Communion Sunday. Though we start a new series today, you could track a thread through the last couple of weeks: on identity as people in Christ having a purpose greater than ourselves, to Balajied's words last Sunday on imitating Christ, and doing so with humility within the global scope and mission of the church.

And on into this Sunday. Today we begin a new series looking at the prophet Elisha. We'll be spending all our time in the Book of Kings. Honestly, I would guess that for many of us, Elisha's life may not be something you could give a summary of. Maybe you recognize the name, but not much more. Or even more broadly the Book of Kings may not be a part of the Bible you feel you know well. It's part of the Bible that often becomes “flyover territory.” And that's a shame because there is this rich, heartbreaking story of a people stumbling forward and of the God who continues in faithfulness toward them, even when things look darkest.

It is a dark chapter in Israel's history that forms the backdrop of Elisha's life, but along the way, as I hope we'll see, his life and ministry teach us not just about how God was at work then, but also how God is at work in mission even now. Let's go to God's Word together.

### **2 Kings 2:1-14**

**Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here, for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”**

**Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here, for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”**

**Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and the two of them crossed on dry ground.**

**When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” He responded, “You have asked a hard thing, yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father,**

**father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.**

**He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water. He said, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah? Where is he?” He struck the water again, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha crossed over.**

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me? Almighty God, as you have poured out your spirit upon your prophets, upon your saints, and most of all through your Son Christ Jesus, we pray for a share of that spirit among us this morning. And for the Word spoken and heard, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Twelve years ago, a man died after being blessed with a long life well lived. His name was Tom Gillespie. The top line of his obituary or any article about him likely noted that he served as president of Princeton Theological Seminary, for over twenty years.

The start to his tenure had to have been a daunting one. His predecessor, Rev. Dr. James McCord, was something of a living legend, as far as seminary presidents go. It’s been said half-jokingly that any student that goes to that seminary goes there on James McCord’s dime, because of the work he had done in development and sustainable financial support of the seminary’s mission and work. (There’s a reason why ministers graduating from that seminary come out with only a fraction of the student debt compared to those graduating from peer institutions.) But McCord also expanded the seminary’s reach into the international community of the church, representing the seminary and the Presbyterian Church at the World Council of Churches.

It was that legacy that Dr. Gillespie stepped into as the next president in 1983. He left a flourishing pastorate in California to come across the country to lead this institution. And as the saying goes, you don’t want to be the one who follows the one—or perhaps specific to this situation, you don’t want to be the guy who follows the guy. But he did, because that’s where he felt God calling him.

We come to Scripture today finding a ministerial transition of sorts, and handing over of responsibility. Two prophets feature in today’s passage, with very similar and usually confusing names. Elijah (with a “j”) and Elisha (with an “sh”).

We were introduced to Elisha briefly a few chapters earlier in 1 Kings when he starts following Elijah, but this is the first time he’s given much to do.

On three occasions, Elijah tells his protege to stay where he is, for God was sending Elijah to this or that place. And each time, Elisha says to his mentor, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”

Then as they came to the Jordan River, Elijah took off his cloak, his mantle as it’s called, rolled it up and struck the water in the river. The water parted, and the two crossed on dry ground.

Just another amazing thing that Elisha had seen God do through his master, his mentor Elijah. But there was a tinge of sadness about this one, because he knew what was coming. Whenever the went to a new place, a company of prophets—there something of an official group at the time—he would be told, “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” A bit of a downer thing to tell someone.

But once across the Jordan, Elijah turns to Elisha and says, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” And Elisha responds, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” That was a hard ask, Elijah told him, but honestly the request comes for good reason. Elisha knew what trials and tribulations Elijah had faced, what he himself had faced in accompanying Elijah.

He was with Elijah when he faced off with the king, a king named Ahab, telling him his reign would come to an end, that God would wipe out his line. Kings tend not to like hearing that sort of thing. Maybe the king would listen, indeed as Ahab did at one point. Or maybe the king wouldn’t listen and instead send people out to kill the prophet who did this, indeed as Ahab had done prior.

It was a dangerous time in Israel anyway—sadly dangerous times come far too frequently in that part of the world as we see even today. The kingdom was divided, north and south. The northern kingdom of Israel in perpetual rivalry even armed conflict with the southern kingdom of Judah. Long past were the days of a united kingdom under kings like David and Solomon, and instead you had a prophet Elijah going to the kings of Israel, telling them to repent of their ways. And doing that sort of thing was dangerous. That’s what Elisha saw Elijah do again and again.

So for Elisha to tell Elijah, “Let me inherit a double share of your spirit,” it meant he knew he was going to need it, and maybe that he was a bit frightened at the prospect, frightened at the prospect of no longer having his mentor, his master with him.

When Tom Gillespie died, I admit I wasn’t all that torn up about it. I never knew the man. I had heard the name, but his tenure at the seminary ended five years before I started there. I was in school, though, when he passed, and as he had still lived in the community, the memorial service celebrating his life would be held there.

I was surprised then, when my old pastor, the pastor at the church I grew up in in Nashville, a man named Todd Jones and no small mentor to me, shared with me that he would be coming in town for the service.

Todd later shared that Gillespie had been a voice of counsel and guidance for him throughout his years in ministry, someone to which he could always turn for encouragement in the harder stretches of ministry, for correction and honesty when he perhaps had lost sight of what truly mattered: seeking Christ, spreading his gospel of love and grace, and furthering his kingdom.

Todd confided that it was difficult for him to imagine a world, to imagine his place and his ministry in that world, without a presence like Tom Gillespie there to guide him in it. It made him uneasy, sharing, “The loss of him from my life will leave a huge void.”

This, coming from a pastor who as far as I was concerned shouldn’t need any kind of mentor. He had all the answers and wisdom already. He wasn’t exactly green in the work of ministry. And I’ll confess it was unsettling for me to hear someone that I relied upon for wisdom and guidance tell me that he in turn relied on someone else for wisdom and guidance and would feel a great void not having that someone in his life anymore.

Elisha mourned too. There on the banks of the Jordan, he was separated from his master and saw him taken up a whirlwind. And when he passes out of sight, Elisha tore his clothes in grief.

The Book of Kings doesn’t give us much as far as what’s going on in Elisha’s mind on the banks of the Jordan, after his master, his mentor was taken up into heaven. Only that he sees his master’s cloak on the ground, and picks up the mantle. (This is where that phrase comes from, if you were wondering.)

I like to wonder what all must have been going through his head then. It wasn't necessarily symbolic for him right then and there in that moment. He was just picking up his master's cloak that had fallen off. But perhaps in his own mind he's remembering what Elijah had done with that mantle, seeing him take it and strike the water of the river, seeing the water part in two, just as the water had parted before Moses, and Israel crossed over the Red Sea, just as the water had parted before Joshua and Israel crossed over the Jordan, there at that same river. He picks up that mantle, perhaps wondering whether he truly belongs in that same line of prophets and leaders: Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha? Perhaps he doubts whether he's qualified to continue on in the same work he had seen Elijah do.

The Book of Kings doesn't give us those details. It only tells us that Elisha went back to the banks of the Jordan, and just as his master had done, he struck the water with his mantle, and it parted in two, and he crossed back over.

Something Todd told me once, as he was nearing his own retirement, was that when it comes down to it in ministry we are ultimately stewards and caretakers, meaning he knew that his tenure as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Nashville would one day end and another would take on that figurative mantle. And it doesn't mean that you just turn passive, waiting out the clock until your time is done: you do the work, the mission set before you by God with energy and excitement. But you do so knowing that that mission, that ministry did not start with you, nor, short of Christ's return, will it end with you. That goes for churches, that goes for seminaries, that goes for mission agencies, for Bible studies, for small groups. Sure, beginnings and endings may come: churches may be planted, churches may close, but the overall mission and ministry don't start and stop.

There's a line of theology known by the Latin words *Missio Dei*, or the "mission of God." And the basic premise of it is that we shouldn't strictly think in terms of the church's mission. (It's not the end of the world if you ever say the phrase "the mission of the church," but it's a helpful way to reconsider it.) Instead of the church's mission, we should rather think in terms of God's mission in Christ, and the part, the privileged part, the church has to play in it.

There's one instance in the Gospel of John. After Christ's resurrection, he appears to his disciples and says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It's stated so quickly without any fanfare that we can miss just how important that is. Just as the Father has sent Christ, that is, the mission of God in Christ Jesus, so I send you.

The very mission of God in Christ is precisely the mission given to Christ's followers. It was not started by the disciples, nor can it be stopped by the disciples. It comes from the Lord through his Son and empowered by his Spirit, and it has always been at work. It means the work of mission, of ministry is one we should enter humbly, not thinking that we are bringing the gospel on our own, that we're inventing the wheel, or that we are pioneers in how God is at work, whether it's a new effort, a new group, a new act of service, or even a new mission abroad or locally, for no matter where we may go, God has already been at work and the Spirit has already been preparing the way.

The task set before Christ's disciples, and by extension, before the church, is to inherit that share of the Spirit, as Elisha did, and humbly pick up the mantle, nervously wonder whether we have any business being considered in the same breath as all those names who had faithfully carried it before us. But then quietly, without any fanfare, go about the same work, the same mission, the same ministry that has been handed down to us.

At Tom Gillespie's funeral, there was no shortage of dignitaries gathered, crowded into the sanctuary of Nassau Presbyterian Church. Seats were scarce, as many had come to pay their respects. I was only in there because at

the time I sang in the seminary choir—that's more a statement of willingness than qualification, Andrew. After a twenty-year tenure, Gillespie had rubbed elbows with some notable names and made connections with countless churches, seminaries, and mission agencies, and many were represented there that day, a testimony to the wideness of his impact as president of the seminary. A lot of noteworthy accomplishments could have been mentioned.

But you know what got brought up the most during that service? It was that after he retired as president, when he could've taught some engaging class in lofty theology—he had a Ph.D. in it, after all—when he could've travelled the country, the world, preaching—and I suppose he did a bit of that—when he could've kept rubbing elbows with the seminary dignitaries of the world, he didn't really focus on any of that. Instead in last eight years of his life, he taught second grade Sunday School at Nassau Presbyterian Church, and that was what was mentioned the most.

I wonder whose mantle he picked up to do that. I wonder what mantle you might pick up too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.