

Suttons Bay Congregational Church February 26, 2006
2 Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9 The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

2 Kings 2:1-12

1 When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 2 Elijah 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.

3 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, "but do not speak of it."

4 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.

5 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, "but do not speak of it."

6 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." So the two of them walked on.

7 Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. 8 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.

9 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.

10 "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours, otherwise not."

11 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. 12 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 own clothes and tore them apart.

This past week, I was talking to the father of four who was lamenting the challenges of funding his children's college educations. He has two kids who are already in college, one who is starting in the fall and a fourth planning to graduate from high school in a couple of years. He admitted that though he paid the tuition for the first two, children numbers three and four were going to have to get scholarships, grants, and loans to help defray the costs of their tuitions. As a youngest child myself, this bugs me. So now, along with the one or two baby pictures these youngest children may have of themselves, as compared to the albums and albums of baby pictures of the first born, they'll now also have student loan debt while their oldest siblings are graduating free and clear, ready to

face the world without the burden of monthly loan payments. I'd say the situation is far from fair and unexpectedly reflective of Old Testament principles of inheritance and birth order.

In this day and age, it's hard to imagine a will or trust fund that holds birth order as a qualifier for how much inheritance children receive. It's taboo to show favor to one child over another. I even feel guilty if I show favor to one of our three dogs over the others. Even though our corgi Willie's behavior and manners are abysmal as compared to his two sisters, I still love him as much as I love the other two. I don't love the corgis based on their behavior, I love them because they're my dogs. And yet it still sometimes puts me into a quandary, trying to be fair and equal in the amount and nature of love I show each of these dogs. For instance, because I love them equally and want to convince them of that, I want to give each of them an equal amount of food. However, our corgi Ruby is a little on the rotund side these days and so she shouldn't be eating as much as her brother and sister. And so, if I really love her, I won't give her an equal portion, I'll give her a lesser portion, as that will help her to be healthier. And yet, though I know it's the best thing for her, I still feel guilty that I'm not giving her an equal number of kibbles. Honest to Pete, I go through this little doggy parent struggle every evening at five when I feed the dogs. I can't imagine trying to do this with children, trying to keep it all equal and yet knowing that perhaps equal isn't always what is best and all of this mental back and forth over caring for multiple dogs is just one of the reasons why Nathan is quite likely to remain an only child.

But these concepts of equality and fairness for which I, along with many of you in your own lives, strive are relatively modern. They didn't apply in ancient, and still don't apply in many contemporary, cultures. It was a given that the eldest child, I should say the eldest son as women weren't regarded as heirs, had the bigger birthright. And it's this larger birthright that Elisha is requesting from Elijah in this passage from 2 Kings. The request for an inheritance has nothing to do with the family china or homestead, but rather with spirit. Elijah was a great and mighty prophet, highly revered in his society. Elisha was his apprentice of sorts. Elisha longed for the kind of spiritual fortitude and theological wisdom that his teacher Elijah possessed. And so he asks for a second helping, a double portion, of Elijah's spirit. Elisha is asking that Elijah treat him as a first-born son, his most endowed offspring, as it was the custom in that time for the first born to receive a double portion of the father's wealth. And that's what Elisha wants from Elijah, second helping of Spirit.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could inherit something like spirit charisma? What if we, like Elisha, could approach one of our elders, someone whom we really respect and admire, and ask her to make us more like she is. If we could, I know what I'd do, I'd ask my Dad for an inheritance; as it is I think I'm slated to get half of my parents assets when they die. But I don't yearn for half of a 45 acre lot in northwest Ohio or the balance of their bank accounts and I certainly hope I don't see either of those things coming my way for a very, very long time. But, there is something I really want to inherit. I yearn for my father's patient wisdom. I want to be like him, able to sit back and listen, keeping my mouth shut and thoughts to myself, regardless of the pressure or expectation to do

otherwise. I wish I could better control my tendency to say what is on my mind as soon as it enters my mind, issuing opinions and declarations often before I have a chance to mull them over. On personality inventories they call this having a strong sense of urgency. If I could, I'd ask Dad for a double portion of patient wisdom to overcome my strong sense of urgency. But, even if I asked, he wouldn't be able to meet my request, just as Elijah didn't have the power to meet Elisha's request. Charisma, being filled with the Spirit, is something that only God has the power to give, a reality Elijah alludes to in his response to Elisha saying, "You have asked a difficult thing, yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours, otherwise not." This is a strange response that leaves us wondering. Elisha gets the double portion of spirit if he sees Elijah die. If not, well then sorry Elisha. No second helping for you.

What did Elijah mean? Why would Elisha have more spirit if he saw Elijah carried away into heaven? Would the second helping of spirit come as a result of witnessing first hand the miracle of Elijah's ascent into heaven? That is what it implies, but we don't know for sure. And perhaps more important to us this morning, how would we get a second helping of Spirit of Charisma if we wanted it? I often hear folks saying that they wish they felt closer to God, or that they yearned for an encounter with God, or that they really wanted to experience God first hand in their lives. And aren't they really just asking for the same as Elisha did, a second helping of Spirit, a stronger faith and conviction that yes, God is real and yes, they are important to the living God.

A commentator on these passages defines the kind of spirit Elisha requests as "the divinely endowed charisma that may be apportioned and transferred to others." This implies that unlike my father not being able to will me his patient wisdom, Elijah did in some way have the ability to apportion and transfer the Spirit God had endowed him with to others. He says that it isn't easy, but in the end, Elisha does receive his second helping of Spirit. And because he does, he goes on to become a great prophet in his own right.

So how can we do the same? How can we increase our experience of God's spirit? It seems unlikely that we're going to see anyone ascend into heaven on a divinely appointed chariot as Elisha saw Elijah do. And in the absence of witnessing those kinds of miracles, how can we increase our belief?

As we look for an answer to this question, I think it is important to recognize that all of us have inherited, in equal portion, God's Spirit. We have all been infused with it and have charisma. There is no longer any inequality based on birth order for scripture tells us that we are all equal in Christ. Therefore, no body has been given more Spirit than has another. We've all got it. That is, after all, what baptism is all about. It is the public recognition, a ritual if you will, of what we already know of human life, that each of us is sacred and the Spirit of God is upon us. It's just that we often don't know how to recognize how the Spirit is living and moving in our lives. We think we don't know God even though we may experience God every day. But learning to recognize God takes a little practice and discernment.

Last summer I was invited to join four other women in a spiritual discernment group. I

was hesitant at first, concerned that it might just turn into a bi-weekly gripe session about our jobs, husbands, and lives in general. I have no interest in being part of a group such as that and so I almost turned down their invitation. But I'm so glad I didn't because attending these gatherings every week has become one of the most essential parts of my spiritual journey. We begin our gathering sitting in silence for a few minutes, letting our bodies and minds calm as our spirits become more attuned to each other and God. We then take turns sharing our stories about how we've experienced God in our lives since we last met. Or, we might talk about how we're struggling to experience God or know God's will in a certain situation. Every thing we say is held in confidence and we're encouraged not to give each other advice. After many gatherings with this group, I have found, that as I hear the women sharing their stories, I can glimpse how God has been present to them. And knowing that God has been present with them, I grow ever more convinced that God is present with me. In those moments, they are Elijah to my Elisha. They are seemingly filled with a double portion of the spirit and as I listen, I want to ask them to share the spiritual mojo they've got with me. And just by sharing their story, they do, whether it's intentional or not, increase my faith. When we leave that basement room of Grace Episcopal Church in Traverse City every other Wednesday, I feel more infused with the Spirit than I did going in, and often I feel that way on the evenings when I haven't even said a word.

Being part of that spiritual discernment group has convinced me of the power of testimony. It's not something we do too often around here, though you'll remember a few folks stood up during October to share a bit of their faith journeys with us. But we need to do it more often because, as many of you know, talking about something tends to make it more real to us. As Thomas Long puts it in his new book called *Testimony*, "At the most profound level, Christians talk about faith because it is a truly human act to want to tell the truth."⁽⁵⁾ And that is what giving testimony to how God has been active in your life is, telling your truth. And yet, though it is your truth, it is often taboo to talk about God, even within the walls of a church. I guess it is somewhat telling that our spiritual discernment group in which we bat around the words God and Jesus with shameless abandon meets in the empty, dingy, deserted basement of a church. Talking about God is just not something that is done in good society. We pay our ministers to do it and we might mention the three-letter "G" word behind closed doors but other than that, God talk is muted in our society. Or, it is used in political circles to hijack dialogue and push an agenda, but don't get me started.

The point here is that if we're to have a second helping of Spirit, if we, like Elisha, yearn for a greater closeness to and awareness of God, we're probably going to have to talk about God. Because in talking about God, we're forced to articulate our thoughts about God and recognize our experiences of the Divine. And that is why, starting next week and continuing throughout the Sundays in Lent, a few members and friends of our congregation are going to give testimony during worship. These brave souls have agreed to stand up here and tell you their truth, to tell you how they have experienced God in their lives. And as you listen to them, I hazard to guess that you'll get a second, third, and even fourth helping of the Spirit, that you'll inherit some of the Spirit that they have.