Our first scripture lesson for today tells a tale of transition. It’s the story of how Elijah, perhaps the foremost prophetic figure in the Old Testament, is taken to heaven, leaving behind the responsibility to carry on the prophetic work to his successor Elisha. As the narrative unfolds, notice how Elijah wants Elisha to stay behind—almost like he’s reluctant to hand over the reins. Notice how Elisha sticks right with him all the way to the end. When you hear the word mantle, know that it was a loose, sleeveless garment worn over other clothes—a cloak. Pay attention to what happens to Elijah’s mantle.

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; be 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 Elisha went over.

Our second lesson is from Paul’s letter to the Galatians and it contains his enumeration of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus
have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

There was perhaps no more famous prophet in all of Israelite history than the great Elijah.

As a measure of his impact, consider this. Still today, when Jewish people gather to celebrate Passover Seder meals, they leave an empty chair for Elijah—in memory of him and in hopes that he might return. Elijah also gets some air time in the New Testament. John the Baptist is intentionally portrayed as an Elijah type. When Jesus asks his own disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” their answer includes, “Some say that you are Elijah...” And then, on the Mountain of the Transfiguration, the figure of Elijah appears, along with the figure of Moses, on either side of Jesus. Elijah clearly made his mark in history.

Elijah, who hailed from Tishbe in Gilead, came by his fame through his prophetic exploits in the 9th century B.C.E., a difficult political time for the Israel of that day. King Ahab, a ruler with a toxic reputation, was in power. It was said that Ahab did more evil in the sight of the Lord than all the kings who came before him. It was in that context that Elijah spoke for God against a king who was characterized as unfaithful and prone to evil.

There are some colorful stories told about Elijah in the Old Testament. He was not just a spokesman for justice; he was a healer and a miracle worker.

He emerges in Chapter 17 of 1st Kings to announce to Ahab that there will be a drought—a drought that will only end when he says so.

Elijah then goes to Zarephath in Sidon, where a starving widow feeds him with the last of what she has—making a cake out of what seems to be the remainder of her oil and flour. He promises that her jar of flour and her jar of oil will not run out—and day after day the jars continues to provide what she needs, just like the manna God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness. Then, when the widow’s son dies, Elijah prays to God and the boy comes back to life again.

Soon after Elijah then is instructed by God to go to King Ahab, who calls him a troubler of Israel—and he turns the tables on him and says, “You are the one who troubled Israel, because you’ve left behind the commandments and followed the fertility God.” He tells Ahab to have all Israel to assemble at Mt. Carmel for a contest between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal, the Canaanite fertility God, to see who can call down fire from heaven to consume an offering. The prophets of Baal are unsuccessful, but Elijah, after having the wood and the offering doused with water, prays and the fire comes. When the contest is over, the zealous Elijah slays every last one of the prophets of Baal—which may have been overkill—he’d already proved his point.

The drought ends. Jezebel, Ahab’s queen, enraged by Elijah’s slaying of the prophets, sends troops after him and he flees, scared for his life. After 40 days and 40 nights, he winds up on another mountain, this one called Horeb. There he meets God—not in a mighty wind that begins to blow, not in an earthquake that shakes the ground around him, not in a fire that blazes up, but in sound of sheer silence. Then he’s sent back out to continue his prophetic works—but he’s also told to anoint his own successor, a man named Elisha, the one who walks with him all the way to the Jordan in the text we read this morning and there sees him being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elijah comes upon Elisha plowing a field, he throws his mantle on him, and Elisha follows after the elder prophet. The younger man becomes Elijah’s disciple and Elijah mentors the young Elisha in the
ways of being a prophet. But Elijah is not quite ready to hand over the reins, as it were. Not until the
text we read this morning. This is when the succession plan goes into full effect. This is when the
mantle of Elijah’s leadership falls to and gets taken up by Elisha.

Today is a good day to talk about transitions like this, how the mantle gets taken up by the next
woman or man up, the next generation—in a church, in a family, in a country—because today we
ordain and install new elders in Lee Rainie and Dan Krabill. Today we send another group of kids off
on a Habitat mission trip as we have been doing every summer now for at least a generation. And
two weeks from today will be our new associate pastor Katie Strednak-Singer’s first official day with
us. July 10th. I cannot wait! The mantle of spiritual leadership, the mantle of working to make a
difference for God’s compassion and justice in the world, the mantle of carrying on the mission falls
to the next person, the next generation.

This is the way life and life in the church goes.

It’s not that Elijah wasn’t a wonderful prophet of God, that he didn’t accomplish great things. He was
and he did. They tell stories about him still. But the work isn’t all about him. It’s about the Spirit
of God in him—and what the Spirit of God could do through him and through the larger community.

I had been at the little church I served in upstate New York for about a year or so when people began
saying to me, “We haven’t had a pastor here like you since Scotty Allan was here.” There was a black
and white picture of Scotty with his wife and two children in the narthex of the church. He was the
pastor who served that congregation in the 1950’s. Young and dynamic, filled with charm and
charisma, people adored him. It was the 50’s, and churches everywhere were growing, and Scotty
had that little church I served really taking off. There were all sorts of stories about Scotty. I have to
tell you, when people started to compare me to Scotty, it made me work all the harder!

Scotty was so talented that sooner or later, another larger church, down in Schenectady decided to
call him. Our own Jane Peil was a teenaged member of that church. Scotty and his family moved
down to Schenectady and just a year or two into his time there, they were all killed in a plane crash.
The news rocked the church in Schenectady and it rocked the little Community Chapel of West Glens
Falls. The tiny church I served was still grieving Scotty and his family leaving them for a larger
church—with all of the sadness, anger, and sense of betrayal that could come with that—when they
had to cope with the news of his tragic death. They never really recovered. Scotty became somehow
larger than life—and from that point on, every pastor who ever came in was compared to Scotty, who
could do no wrong.

“If we just had someone like him again, everything would turn around,” they’d think. In the back of
their minds they never quite let go of Scotty, nobody could be Scotty. The focus became more about
him—than about the larger mission of the church.

So I worked my tail off and when I left five years later to go to a larger church in North Carolina, the
ego in me wants to think that there were people who looked at those who came after me and said,
“Well, he’s okay—she’s okay—but there’ll never be Aaron.”

Do you see the problem in that? The mission of the church, the life of a family, the work of an
organization, is never about one particular person—it’s about new leadership, new generations
stepping up. It’s about the team, not the individual. The larger goal, not the particular personnel.
Some sports teams, when they deal with injuries, have a philosophy, “Next man up”—or, woman up,
depending on the team.
So very competent committee chairs retire and are replaced. Beloved pastors move on and someone comes in behind them to carry on the mission in a new and different way. The kids who went on the Habitat trip twenty years ago are now in their thirties, but we have some new ones heading off this afternoon, who someday will be in their thirties, believe it or not. I don’t even want to think about that? The matriarch of a family, the last remaining member of a generation passes on, and the next generation becomes the head of the family.

My wife Judith has a theory that Elijah the prophet needed to be replaced because he had become confused about the mission. He was zealous for God, that’s for sure. But Elijah started to think that everything depended on Elijah himself. His passion led him to take things into his own hands—not just to have the showdown with the priests on Mt. Carmel, but to kill all 450 of them (which was not the first, nor sadly, would it be the last example of violence committed in the name of religion). Then after fleeing the troops of an unsurprisingly enraged Queen Jezebel, he has a conversation with God in which he says, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” Only then is it that God tells him to find a successor—to remind him that it really isn’t all about Elijah; it’s all about God.

So Elisha starts to follow him and then one day, Elijah starts heading towards the Jordan River, stopping at Bethel and Jericho on the way. The elder prophet keeps trying to leave Elisha behind, but Elisha wants to go all the way with him. And when they finally get to the Jordan, Elijah asks what Elisha wants from him.

The younger prophet replies, “You know what I want. I want a double portion of your spirit.” Which is a way of saying, “I want the inheritance that would fall to a firstborn son.”

Even if he has sometimes been too zealous, sometimes confused his will with God’s will, Elisha recognizes the Elijah has done many good things for God and for the people he served and loved. If he is to assume that prophetic role, he wants to have the same courage, the same zeal, the same faithfulness that Elijah exhibited on his best days. Because the truth is you can have that zeal for God without allowing it to become distorted into hate for someone else. Elisha wanted that zeal, the courageous and beautiful part of it: a heart completed devoted to God. That is the request granted by the Holy Spirit, that Elisha would pick up the cloak of Elijah and take on the mantle of faith that propelled Elijah to be a great prophet for God.

Jesus carried that mantle, too. Sometimes people looked at Jesus and said, “Is he Elijah, come back down to earth?” Because they saw in him that zeal, that single-minded devotion to God, that undivided heart for God. But they saw other things in Jesus, too. They saw a gentleness when he gathered the children into his lap. They saw joy that emanated from somewhere deep inside, joy that bubbled to the surface when he celebrated at a wedding or relaxed with friends. They saw patience when Jesus continued to work with his disciples and encourage them even when they got it wrong or misunderstood his message again and again, being as Dan Thomas used to say, the DUH-sciples.

People saw the zeal of Elijah in Jesus, but they saw other things as well. They saw kindness when he spoke to a woman who wiped his feet with her hair, a kindness that refused to humiliate anyone even if it would have made him look better in the moment. They saw generosity when he healed person after person even far into the night, even when he was bone tired, and when he offered table fellowship to all kinds of people, welcomed them, fed them, made room for them, when he encountered people not like him and still offered himself to them.
People saw the zeal of Elijah in Jesus, but they saw something different altogether when it came to how Jesus dealt with his opponents, how he dealt with the dangers of speaking truth in a world where truth isn’t always welcomed. They saw self-control when he spoke with temple leaders and political leaders. Oh, there was that one time when he turned over the tables, yes, but in encounter after encounter with his enemies Jesus spoke simply and with great self-control, often posing questions rather than responding in anger or escalating the rhetoric. He didn’t allow anger to create a false agenda and call it God’s agenda. People who watched him saw how Jesus acted with utter faithfulness, continuing his mission and ministry despite danger. They saw an indescribable peace that allowed Jesus to accept the road to Jerusalem and to the cross knowing that he would be in God’s hands.

Mostly, they saw love, the embodied love of God, that blazed like the sun through every aspect of Jesus’ being, love that spilled out all over the place and touched those around him in ways that made them know that God was with them, for them, in them, around them, and that God wanted most of all to work through them for the good of the whole creation, every person and created thing, that God wanted that same love, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, kindness, self-control, patience, peace, and joy to be manifest in them. God wanted them to take up the mantle and follow in the footsteps of the blessed one, Jesus.

The apostle Paul put a name to these attributes. In Galatians 5 he called them the fruits of the Spirit. Today, it is worth remembering that it is not Elijah’s mantle that falls to us. It’s Jesus’ mantle. So as we transition in all sorts of ways, when we head off to do the work of Habitat, when we embody God’s love in the world, never forget that it is not about us as individuals. It is about how God can work through us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.