

A sermon preached by  
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Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church  
September 27, 2020

TEXTS: II Kings 2: 1-12

Philippians 1: 3-11

### **EVERY ENDING IS A NEW BEGINNING**

Well, Friends, today is a bittersweet day for me, as I end my time as your Interim Pastor. 13 months is a relatively short period of time, and yet I feel rooted in this place, and very grateful. You have given me a gift, in this last chapter of my professional ministry – offering me challenges and opportunities that have stretched my soul and enlarged my heart.

Paul's words this morning in Philippians are part of the love letter he writes to one of his favorite churches - those communities he has founded and shaped across the near eastern world. The first chapter of this letter is filled with words of warmth and affection – words which describe my feelings today as I stand in this pulpit for the last time.

And so, using Paul's words, I want to assure you that I hold you in my heart and always will – because we have shared in the Gospel from the first day up to now. Partnership between pastor and people is the foundation of Paul's understanding of ministry, and so it has been here for me.

Memories of our time together will fade quickly for all of us. This is the nature of interim ministry. But there are some things I will not forget. The clean, simple lines of this elegant sanctuary – chilly and white when no one is around – but vibrant and colorful when filled with people and music and flowers and banners and the hopes of God's people.

I will never forget my first Sunday – standing up here, when all of a sudden your absolutely incredible choir started singing a descant with electrifying harmony. I thought I had died and gone to heaven! That first Sunday, your pastors started pouring water into the font before every Prayer of Confession. And then we challenged you to actually touch each other through the Passing of the Peace, inviting you to encounter your neighbor and look each other in the eye. And, contrary to some predictions, the walls did not fall down. The Passing the Peace has become, I hope, a cherished and necessary part of your worship life together.

Along with worship, my greatest joy has been working with an incredible professional staff – laughing and planning and praying and challenging each other – the first time in my long ministry I have actually looked forward to staff meetings. Friends, you have a rich treasure in Dieter and Mel and David and Courtney and Anne and Jesi and Jane and Kent and John and Rian and Warren. I believe your new Pastor will be inheriting one of the finest staff teams in the nation.

But the sharing in the Gospel, as Paul puts it, has not just been the staff. The lay leadership of this congregation – especially the Session, the Deacons, the Stephen Ministers, the PNC, and all the committees that make the program and organizational life of this community happen – your leaders have exercised creativity, courage, and grit in a difficult year of transition – made all that much more difficult by COVID 19. Prior to the building shut down, these leaders led you through community conversations to dream about your future. They redesigned the Sunday morning schedule to respond to the very real concerns of younger families. They confronted the fears that some of you had about security on Sunday mornings and made bold recommendations. They refreshed and renewed valued traditions around Advent and Christmas and Holy Week. They oversaw major building renovation projects. They made hard but wise decisions about adapting church life to the reality and dangers of a pandemic. And then, they recognized that our financial systems needed an overhaul, and that our technology simply needed to step up to the demands of a post-COVID19 world. And so, we have endured the difficult goodbyes and retirements of long-time valued personnel. And a new support staff team is forming, with skills to move you into your future.

Those of us who have been around a while know that every ending is also a new beginning and so it is for Ladue Chapel. You sealed your new beginning two weeks ago – when by a vote of 354 to 9, you called Doug King to be your next Pastor/Head of Staff, beginning on November 10th. I believe that our Hebrew scripture text can serve as a challenge to you in the weeks and months that stretch ahead of you. But first a story.

It occurred to me this week that I was ordained into the Ministry of Word and Sacrament 46 years ago almost to the day – September 28, 1974. Family, friends, colleagues, and church officials were all gathered to participate in this ancient ritual of the church. But, just before the service was to begin, my Dad gave me a gift. He handed me one of his well-used preaching robes – which had been carefully altered to fit a 25 year-old woman. In that moment, Dad passed the mantle to me – literally and figuratively – laying upon me the well-worn fabric of office – but also the blessing and responsibility of a family tradition and a spiritual value. And so, I became the third generation of the Andrews clan to claim a pastoral calling.

Which is why I resonate with today's Hebrew scripture lesson – this phantasmagorical Elijah saga. Elijah, of course, was the first great prophet, the miracle worker, the manic depressive who shaped the early history of the people Israel. Today, we meet Elijah, the mentor and Elijah, the wise old man – the one who knows that the final task of living is to leave a legacy behind. And Elisha – the younger man chosen by God to succeed Elijah – Elisha, on behalf of all of us, picks up Elijah's robe and puts on the mantle of God's presence in the world.

Well, I am obviously no Elijah – my decades of ministry pale in comparison to his historic role in the history of salvation. But, leaving a legacy is important to all of us who are fading away, as we call younger leaders to pick up the mantle of co-creating with God in this broken and beautiful world.

And so today, I am calling YOU. You, my friends, along with your amazing staff, are Elisha – the future of this congregation – and I hope you feel God's firm and faithful mantle resting upon your shoulders.

Ladue Chapel, today I charge you to become Elisha. Pick up the mantle of all the faithful saints who have dreamed and loved and served in this place.

Cherish your children – and embed them in this community – so that they can learn to love God, love themselves, and love their neighbors in the world.

Continue to make magnificent music in this sacred space – so that the walls vibrate, and the world hears your melodies of praise and forgiveness and hope.

Break bread around this table – and then be generous and radical and eager to feed the hunger of the world.

Bathe your babies in these baptismal waters – and renew your own baptism week in and week out – so that you become a blessing in a word begging to be healed and renewed.

Celebrate this exceptional building – but please don't worship the building. Use it as a mission tool – dream of new ways that you can invite the world out there to come in here - to use this space as a place of learning and healing for the world.

Embrace your identity as a purple church – a place where you represent the entire red to blue spectrum – both politically and theologically. Instead of avoiding tough conversations around controversial issues of faith and public policy – engage in honest, eager, in depth dialogue. Learn from those with whom you disagree. Find common ground. And then agree to disagree about issues bigger than any of you. According to scripture, unity does not mean uniformity – unity means a creative weaving together of diverse opinions and diverse people into a fabric that reflects our diversity loving God.

Most of all my friends, I charge you to reclaim the two words that shape the entire biblical story – grace and justice. Grace is the utterly dependable and utterly free and utterly extravagant presence of God in all times and all places and in all people. And justice is the shape that that love takes – when we become God's partners in the world.

46 years ago when I put on my father's robe, I felt blessed and empowered by a tradition and purpose far beyond my fragile self. But it wasn't long before I took that robe off and hung it in a closet – glad to have it as a reminder of the past – but instinctively knowing that I needed to design a new robe and a new style uniquely my own.

You see, the continuing story and universal vision of God needs to be acted out in the particularity and freshness of each new context and each new chapter. And so, friends, as you embrace your new identity as Elisha, honor the legacy of the pastors and leaders and members that is embedded in the 76 year history of this congregation. But, please, don't stay there. Pick up your new mantle of ministry, and turn to the future. Yes, pick up your mantle of ministry, and make it your own. All to the Glory of God.

Unlike Elijah, I will not be leaving you in a fiery chariot amidst the tumult of a whirlwind. Instead, I will quietly slip out of this place, loading books and 50 years of memorabilia into my well-worn Elantra. But please know that I will carry with me the memories and stories that we have created together. And echoing Paul's prayer, I will thank God every time I remember you,

praying that your love may overflow more and more – producing a harvest of righteousness that comes only through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May it be so. I love you! Amen.