

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn

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Hand Me Down

2 Kings 2: 1-14

I have never heard God's voice. I have never witnessed its sound to know if it is deep and resounding or soft and whispery. I do not know what it feels like to be called by God in the most well known sense: like Isaiah and his burning coals and seraphim angels or like Ezekiel and the fiery wheel or Abraham with the vastness of the stars laid before me. I know their stories and am, over and over again, in awe of how God chose to work in their lives. But it is not my story. Though these recollections of God's call on their lives are the most famous, they really aren't the most common. Perhaps you know of someone who has experienced something like Isaiah did, or Ezekiel. Just this past week I was fortunate enough to meet a gentleman who, during difficult times, has had several visions of God's promises for him. They were clear and lasting calls on his life. Perhaps you have experienced something like this yourself. If so, what a marvelous gift! For most of us, however, we have a faith and a call that is of the hand-me-down variety. We are less like Isaiah and Abraham and more like Elisha.

Let me share a little bit about Elisha. We do not know much about him prior to this evening's reading but we do meet him, for the first time, toward the end of First Kings, chapter 19. He was working in the fields one day, plowing with a pair of oxen. And Elijah walked up to him and threw his mantle over him. A "mantle" is an old term for a cloak or a coat or an outer robe. So Elijah just walked up to Elisha and threw his coat on him. Immediately Elisha responded. He asked to have one last meal with his parents and, after that, he joined Elijah in his work. When we meet him again he is still following his mentor, knowing it is near the end of their time together. Right before they are parted, Elijah asks him what he wants more than anything in the world and Elisha says, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit," or as one version puts it: I want "your life repeated in my life. I want to be holy just like you." Elisha did not hear God's voice from the heavens or meet angels that flew about him. His call from God came the day Elijah threw his mantle over him and began to show him what true living really looks like. He got a hand-me-down faith.

It makes me wonder: who has thrown their mantle over me in my life? Who has thrown one over you? I will not soon forget a thrown coat moment in the beginning of my life as a pastor. I was doing a residency at Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis under an amazing pastor Bill Enright. He was absolutely dedicated to mentoring young pastors so that we could be successful and faithful in our calls. Each Wednesday night he had us over to his home where we would eat and discuss our last assigned reading or review our most recent sermons. Anyway, we'd only known Bill a few weeks when we were sitting out on his patio and joking around. Somehow I got on a rant about girls' names. "What is with people naming their children Tiffany?" I asked. "I just don't get it! How many Grandma Tiffanys can you picture?!" Immediately Bill looked at me and quietly said, "My granddaughter's name is Tiffany." I was mortified. You've never seen someone backpedal faster than I was! After twisting in the wind for awhile he broke out a smile and said, "I'm just kidding. Her name isn't Tiffany! But it could have been." And, in that moment, he'd thrown more than cold water on me. He'd thrown his mantle on me as well and then and there began to make me into a pastor. Has anyone ever

thrown their coat over you like that? Have they pushed you, knowing you could be more than you were?

I was recently reminded of an important letter my cousin wrote to my grandparents several years ago. My cousin Saul (his parents were hippies!) wrote saying he needed to share with them how they had changed his life. It was because of the two of you," he wrote, "that I began to believe love could be real. I watched the way you treated each other and I knew love was possible." He went on to say that they had provided the sole example of his turbulent childhood of a life that was based on faith and values he did not see at home.

"I watched how you treated other people," he told them, "and I thought maybe I shouldn't toss God and faith and church aside. It was because of you I knew there could be another way." Perhaps they didn't know it at the time but they had thrown their cloaks over Saul and offered him a hand-me-down faith like no one else ever had.

Now I know that hand-me-downs can get a bad name but in no way are they some lesser kind of faith. When someone hands down their faith to us they are offering us the kind of faith that can take a little wear and tear. They are giving us the gift of faith that has stood the test of time and has faced some of the worst life has to offer and yet perseveres intact. Without hand-me-down faith most of us would never know the extent of God's love. We would not know its power except as it has been reflected in another's life. So who has thrown their coat over you? Who has passed their faith to you? And where would you be if they hadn't?

That's the thing about hand-me-downs. That mantle is still out there. Each of us has more than a few in our own possession and they are just waiting to be thrown over someone else. Can God call people using other methods? Can faith be given in other ways? Of course it can. But, most often, God relies on one of us handing it down. There are people in our lives, and even people who are not currently in our lives, who need a mantle thrown on top of them. They may be plowing with oxen or sitting beside you at holiday meals or the person ahead of you in the grocery aisle but they are there and they are in great need of a hand-me-down.

Here is the other, undeniable, part of hand-me-down faith. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are always and continually handing something down. We hand down our priorities with each decision we make about how we spend our money or our time or run our mouths. We hand down our prejudices with our tone and when we choose to smile widely rather than roll our eyes. In each moment we are handing ourselves down to all who know us. The only way to truly and faithfully live is to hand down what is real and true and precious. We need to hand down the kind of faith that, even if it is well worn, is worth holding on to. Recently Saul's grandpa, my grandpa, passed away. He was 92 years old and had been ill for quite some time so it was a blessing when he died for, even in his own opinion, he had lasted too long. But, along with relief that he is finally at peace, I have not been able to shake the feeling that it still wasn't enough time to get all that I wanted from him; to get that double share of his spirit. 92 years and still the time was too short. It is too short for all of us, whether we die tonight or live to 100. It is so short. What a gift we give when we live a life that so honors God and so shines of faith that, when we pass, someone will say—like Elisha—Where is the Lord, the God I met through her? Where is the God I met in him? For I want that God to be my own. I want his life and faith repeated in my life.

I have never heard God's voice. But I have heard my grandpa's voice and my mentor Bill's and I have heard your voices. And, through them, I believe we have heard the voice of God. Now let's pass it down. Amen.