

Our new youth director is a fan of the Avengers. Katie knows her superheroes far better than I do. But I do know that most of them have a trademark. A talisman. A powerful tool that is essential to their identity. Wonder Woman has her golden lasso. Captain America has his shield. The Black Panther has vibranium and all kinds of technology and Iron Man, well, he has his Iron Man armor.

And the prophet Elijah, had his mantle. His cloak.

The first time we hear about Elijah's mantle is when he runs away and goes into hiding because Queen Jezebel has promised to kill him within twenty-four hours. But God finds him out in the middle of nowhere. And before the prophet comes into the presence of God, he uses the cloak to cover his face.

Later on, Elijah uses his mantel to separate the waters of the Jordan River so that he can walk over on dry ground. He rolls it up and THWACK. Strikes the ground and the rivers part. Moses wasn't the only guy to part a body of water. Elijah did it at least twice.

When Elijah goes up into heave it will become Elisha's cloak and it will be a sign that the prophet's power has transferred from the teacher to the student. But for today, the mantel serves another purpose. It's Elisha's call story. It's his job interview.

When Elijah complained to God about Queen Jezebel trying to have him killed, he said "“Lord God All-Powerful, I've always done my best to obey you. But your people have broken their solemn promise to you. They have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets, except me. And now they are even trying to kill me!”

God told him that he would have some help. If he went back home, Elisha would become his assistant. But when he got to Elisha's farm, instead of talking to the other man, Elijah just walks up to him and throws his mantel over Elisha's shoulders. That is not how it is usually done. It seems a little strange. Most call stories involve fancy speeches. Sometimes the person being called protests about whether they are really the right person. *I'm too young*, says Jeremiah. *I stutter*, says Moses. *I don't have the education*, says Amos. There's usually some kind of conversation. The whole cape, cloak, mantle thing isn't the way it's usually done.

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Wearing a mantle wasn't an official part of a prophet's wardrobe or equipment. The Bible talks about kings and priests having special clothing, but not prophets. It was just Elijah's outer garment. His coat, basically. Thankfully, Elisha got the message. He stopped plowing and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my parents good-by, then I'll go with you," he said.

Elijah agrees but he also makes a request "Go but remember what I have done to you." In other words, there's no getting out of this situation. The call is binding. It's irrevocable. It's going to stick, so don't forget what you're doing or who you are.

And then Elisha does something really interesting. He breaks up the wooden yokes and makes a fire. He slaughters the oxen and cooks the meat. It's more than just a farewell barbecue. Elisha has taken the tools of his trade and destroyed them. There is no going back. The symbols of his past life have literally been consumed. He is a farmer no more. Now his identity will be tied to Elijah and his prophet's mantle. He has been called to serve God and to serve God's people. And so, before he leaves, he feeds his friends and family. Then he goes after Elijah and he ministers for him.

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It's a rather extraordinary story and when Elisha finally gets to keep the mantle, when it is his own, it's after he sees Elijah taken up into the sky in a chariot of fire. These are not ordinary guys doing ordinary work. And so, while it might be tempting to think about our own vocation and our own discipleship, and compare it to Elisha's, I'm pretty sure that I am not in their league. I have never seen the former pastor taken up in a chariot of fire to go somewhere else.

My call story is nothing like that.

And Katie Fritchman – if you have a story like this, we need to hear it.

And yet all of us have a few things in common with Elijah and Elisha.

The first is that God has asked us to come and follow. To be disciples. It happens at baptism. It happens when we hear the stories of Jesus. Or we read the letters of Paul. It happens when the Council President calls you on the phone or the pastor asks you if you have a few minutes to talk after worship. Each of those moments is an invitation to answer the call of Jesus to “follow me.”

In Biblical terms, disciples who were called to follow rabbis were called to follow them quite literally. Right behind them. **in their footsteps**. If the teacher walked in the rain, the disciple was sure to get wet. If the teacher marched through the desert, the disciple was going to get hot and sweaty and get sand in his eyes. And if the rabbi stepped in some camel dung as he made his way down the street, the disciple's feet would be just as filthy. Elisha followed Elijah everywhere. And even when Elijah told him to stay put, Elisha kept on.

Like Elisha we are called to keep our focus on our leader. Jesus compared it to plowing a field. If you keep looking behind you instead of watching what's in front of you – you aren't ready! You can't get the job done if you aren't paying attention. You've got to keep face forward, so you don't lose sight of where God wants you to go. You need to keep asking yourself if you're moving in the right direction. Are you on the right path?

While we may not literally step in the muck when we follow the call of God – we're pretty much promised that life as a disciple won't always be easy. It's going to be dirty and messy. And you're going to have to work with people! And they're the worst. They don't always do what you want them to do. They don't always act like you want them to act. Sometimes they don't even show up.

I'm not complaining. This is just the way it is. I've done all those things. I'm one of those people. Sometimes it's hard for us to do the things that God wants us to do. And Jesus says, “Let's be clear. There are going to be rough patches. This is not always going to be easy. This is going to be hard sometimes but follow.”

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When they first met up, Elisha may not have known how tough Elijah's life had been. But since we get the full story in First Kings, we know that in the earlier part of Chapter 19, Elijah's whole attitude was absolutely gloomy. The queen wanted to kill him and after running to the middle of nowhere, he throws himself down under a bush and begs God “I've had enough. Just let me die! I'm no better off than my ancestors. I'm going to just lie under this bush. Take me now, God! I'm ready to go.” And then he lay down under a bush and waits for death to take him. Elijah was a bit of a drama queen.

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We know that the prophetic call can be full of danger, loneliness, and despair. The prophet stands against the most powerful people in the land – and tells them that they are getting it wrong. They are not doing what God would have them do. It's not an easy job, but Elisha and Elijah were not alone. They had each other. And when Elijah left, Elisha was sent helpers of his own.

We may not have extraordinary calls, but we can do extraordinary things and that's based not on what it appears to us but on how it impacts people. Sometimes the simplest things make the biggest difference. The words that we might say the acts of service that we might do don't have to be grand or fancy or miraculous.

Our activities don't have to bear any resemblance at all to anything that those great Bible heroes have done. But we can do extraordinary things in the way that we care for each other. In the things that we do can transform other people's lives.

[A pair of shoes were passed through the congregation.]

This was our mission project at JaM Camp this week. The kids brought in pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and even paper money, to buy "shoes that grow." Each one of these shoes can expand to five different sizes. So, when you buy one pair of shoes for ten dollars, you're really buying five pairs. Our kids are going to buy 54 pairs of shoes, which really means they're buying 270 pairs.

They were created by a man whose name is Kenton Lee. He travelled to Kenya in 2007 on a mission trip to work in an orphanage. While he was there, he saw children who had no shoes. Or their shoes didn't fit properly, or their shoes were falling apart. If you're walking barefoot you get cuts and sores on your feet. And the cuts get infected and it had a devastating effect on a person's wellbeing.

So, he went home and made his first design for shoes that would grow. And then he found a guy who used to work for Nike and new all about shoe manufacturing. They came up with this product and they've improved it over the years. And for ten bucks they will send a pair of shoes to someone who needs them. Can you imagine?

We take shoes for granted. I have dozens of shoes at home. Shoes are something we don't think about, but these kids need shoes. And we can make a difference in their lives. The kids in our church did it penny by penny, nickel by nickel, dime by dime. Asking their friends. Going to their neighbors. And suddenly, children's lives are going to be changed.

Amazing things can happen from a single idea. It might be simple. It might sound impossible. But that doesn't mean that God can't make something amazing happen. Sometimes amazing things even happen when we fail because we get to see things from a different perspective. God is great at working with our messes and turning them around.

And a word to the wise - things often don't turn out the way we've expected or hoped they will, but God can work with that. Our limitations don't keep God from getting things done.

Ministry is not something we do on our own. Christians seldom live in isolation. We have the church. By which I mean not just this community - but the whole church. The universal church. And we do amazing things together.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is with us. Now I regularly think about how Jesus loves me. We sing the song and we know it's true. And my personal image of God is very parental, so I'm tuned into the idea that God the Father loves me as well. But I've got to tell you, I had a realization on Pentecost that the Holy Spirit loves me. I hadn't thought of it that way before. I can't believe I got to be this old without realizing that. The Holy Spirit who has been sent to be your advocate, to be your guide, to be your strength, to be your comfort does all those things out of love for you.

The Holy Spirit loves you and is leading you on. So follow. See where you might go. God loves us dearly and delights in seeing the things that we are able to do for his children. What do you want to do next?