

Right Rev. Dr. Kimberly Heath - Whirlwind Calling

Wall Street United Church – August 31st 2025

2 Kings 2:1-14 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

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.

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, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.' He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

Here we are. Oh my! What a whirlwind this has been! (For those of you who are visiting today or joining for the first time in person or online, I've been the minister here for 18 years, and a few weeks ago at the United Church of Canada's triennial meeting I was elected the 45th Moderator of the UCC! This is a very full-time position for 3 years. While my home remains in Brockville, I will spend a lot of time in Toronto and travelling. I have cleaned out my office here and handed in my keys! Officially I am on a 'Leave of Absence' from Wall Street, though I have been advised by several that it is not easy to return after the appointment. I will have changed and you will have changed ... but it's human nature that we tend to 'freeze the

other' in time and expect them to be exactly the same. So I and we will continue to discern this over the coming months and years.

On the day after I was elected Moderator, Laura Webb, our board chair, said to me in a text. *"I feel like you've been raptured!"* I kind of had that feeling too. Even though I (and we) had been preparing for this possibility for the last 6 months or more. Even though the M&P committee and Karen in the office have been amazing as we prepared for the Fall with Plan A and Plan B (plan A, I stay, plan B, we'll see!). Despite the planning and preparations, it was a total surprise and such a wild experience!

I mean I'm able to fly by the seat of my pants, but when things are important I like to plan and prepare. But there was no real way to prepare for the media interviews! Even the sermon I needed to preach for my installation — I have never been so unprepared, and for such an important sermon!

On to our scripture. I want to be clear that I am not setting myself up here as the prophet Elijah, whisked away from his ministry and from the up and coming, aspiring student, (who had only just recently arrived on the scene) and from the rest of the company of faithful followers ... though there may be similarities...

Let me back up. Remember Elijah, the great prophet of the Old Testament — the one who stood up to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel? He is the one who heard God not in the earthquake, not in the fire, not in the violent wind — but in the *still small voice*. He's also the one who, having confronted the King and Queen feels defeated, depressed and alone. He is so defeated that he wishes to die, sighing over and over that "he alone is left." But God gives him enough for the journey, and gently reminds him that though he is full of crap, he's not at all alone on the journey. So Elijah carries on in God's calling. He carries on, calling the student Elisha to follow him. He carries on until God's time, not Elijah's time, until in the fullness of time his journey on earth comes to an end and he is taken to heaven in a whirlwind, with chariots of fire.

I don't know how ready Elisha, the student, was for this to happen. He seems to have an inkling that it might happen because he insists on staying close to his mentor Elijah. But even if he was sort of prepared for Elijah to be taken from him,

you are never really ready for loss. Those of you who are acquainted with grief, and I know so many of you are... you know that no matter how much warning you get, the end always comes as a surprise, and one you are not ready for.

The scriptures are often short on details. I don't know how Elisha felt in that moment and in the moments after, but my guess is that the emotions were many. Awe and wonder ... because it's not every day you see someone whisked to heaven in chariots of fire! Confusion and bewilderment about what this means, and then likely just plain loss and grief along with fear. There he was, left on the ground alone.

As I said earlier, I'm not setting myself up as the Elijah in this story. Instead I see our pastoral relationship as something that has abruptly experienced a change that is both marvellous and bewildering, confusing and sad at the same time. But in the middle of the many and conflicting emotions one thing was clear: this was the Lord's doing. Elisha would probably have believed it was the Lord's even if the separation had been more traditional with a death and burial — but the chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire separating them and then whisking him up to heaven — was a dead giveaway.

There were no pyrotechnics at the General Council meeting, but I assure you that whirlwind describes the scene well. Many people have asked why I let my name stand for Moderator, and the answer is simply that *I felt called*. I know not everyone experiences call, but I have always experienced it very strongly. I felt it when I was called to ministry — when someone I knew in my upper year residence at McGill said to me *“Kim, I think you are called to ministry. I could imagine you doing something else and then in your 40's realizing that this was your call all along. Don't waste your time!”* The words felt like a lightning bolt, and I knew she was right. I felt God's call strongly after I was ordained and settled Claresholm and Stavely.

All year, before finding out where I and my husband Alex and our baby Anna would be sent, my mother kept saying *“You'd better not take my granddaughter to Alberta!”* And I'd respond: *“Mom, they're not going to send us to Alberta!”* (I don't know why she chose Alberta as the place she didn't want us to go, I think it was synonymous with Timbuktu!) On the day of the phone call at the end of May they

called and said: “How would you like to go to Alberta?” I stammered and asked if I was allowed to think about it, and they said “Yes of course” and that they would call back in 15 minutes. When I hung up I panicked and said to Alex “*We can’t go to Alberta! My mother will kill me!*” On the living room floor we had a map of the country and we knelt down and prayed for God’s will in this. I kid you not — when we said ‘Amen’ the phone rang. It was my mother. She was calling on the car phone. Now this was at a time when the car phone was the size of a large shoe box and it was only meant for emergencies. You didn’t call long distance from Brockville to Toronto on the car phone unless you needed to. She said “*Hi Kim, it’s your mother. I just felt strongly that I needed to call and tell you that if you need to go to Alberta, **you go to Alberta!***” I stammered again, without even telling her I had just had the phone call.

I felt that call again to apply to Wall Street over 18 years ago, and a few more times, like when I decided to do my Doctorate. And I felt it in small ways over the last couple of years when people suggested I should consider letting my name stand for Moderator, and I felt it very strongly last November/December when I was on a minister’s retreat that the Region had organized. I felt it again during a Celebrate Life service that Laura organized. It was a meditative Christmas service here in the sanctuary. It was freezing because our heat wasn’t working properly at the time. I sat on the floor with my back leaning up against a radiator, and I could not ignore the call.

I don’t doubt this is from God. Do I understand it? No. I just trust it. If it’s God’s call for me, you need to trust that it’s God’s call for you too.

Elisha felt the feelings and he trusted, and so he picked up the mantle.

The mantle was the most valuable thing Elijah owned. He would not have owned much. Elijah leaves it because he can’t take it with him. Remember that, as you and we all step closer to the time of our own departing. There is a whole lot we cannot take with us. There is a lot of letting go in the later stages of life. Let go lightly and gracefully.

Elijah leaves behind the mantle — which is a possession but also a sign and symbol of God’s call on his life. The mantle of a prophet. God’s call carries on, the church

carries on, even when one individual leaves. It is always wise to remember that the call is so much bigger than ourselves. We are each in one way totally irreplaceable, and in another totally replaceable.

A mantle is being left behind. This mantle is not just for Pastor Cathy to pick up — though it is partly. But it's also for *you* to pick up. It's for each one of you, because the church is never about one person. Together we are the church. The mantle of Moderator is also for me to pick up and to carry on, trusting that God is in this place. God is on your journey, God is on my journey. God is on our journey.

It's about us and it's about something so much larger than us. There is a world that needs to know they are loved.

Next Sunday morning Rev. Al Tysick is coming to preach. Rev. Al happens to be Jim Hanes' brother-in-law. He just recently put out a book that chronicles his ministry to the poorest people in Canada. His ministry started in Eastern Ontario and he ended up in Victoria BC. His book is a series of very short stories of encounters with people living with addiction, homeless, and reminding each that they have value. The book is so full of love.

That's ultimately our job. We share that love with different people and in different ways, but our mantle is to remove barriers to God's love. There is beautiful music and poetry to be sung and created and cast into the ugliness.

The surprising thing happened, the thing we were not entirely prepared for happened — (perhaps even the thing that some of us didn't want to have happen!) happened. I'm talking of the election to Moderator, but also to anything in your life and in the world that happens that is amazing or dreadful or unexpected. Feel the feelings and then say **yes** to the call in this place. Say yes and walk on, trusting that with the power of the Holy Spirit the waters that separate human from human, the waters of injustice, the waters of fear, will themselves separate, to prepare a path for the power and love of God. We are not alone. Thanks be to God!

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