

Taking up the mantle (Transfiguration B; 2 Kings 2:1-12)

Elisha is unsure of himself at first.

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February 12, 2021

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I've been a fan of Star Wars since Episode IV, the first in the series, was released in 1977. I began reading the Harry Potter books because kids, even those who hated reading, were devouring them, and parents were concerned about gossip they were hearing from others—others who hadn't read any of the books—that they were heretical, filled as they are with witches and wizards and spells.

I became hooked, which prompted me to go back to other beloved stories of their ilk, works like *The Lord of the Rings* and the Narnia books.

All of them are about community and bravery and failing and learning from failure and good and evil and how confusing discernment is and loyalty and getting on with the quest even when the heroes are discouraged or frustrated or just don't feel like pressing on to some goal. All of them are also about us at some deep level, but they're safe, allowing us to play and risk and venture forth and grow and imagine how we might act in similar situations without actually demanding that we do so. They're at a remove from our milieux, yet somehow familiar: they're set "in a galaxy, far, far away" as well as in a school with worries about tests or problems with friends or grownups who don't understand.

The Bible's like that too, sometimes. Take the Elijah/Elisha cycle in 1 and 2 Kings, for instance. Especially with Elisha, we have a neophyte in training. Not unlike Luke with Yoda or Harry with Dumbledore or any of the other apprentices with their mentors, Elisha has been doing some on-the-job training since 1 Kings 19, when God told

Elijah to anoint him as prophet and heir. In the reading for today, he has his final preparation before assuming the position to which he was called: he'll no longer be a novice, but a prophet in his own right, designated to take up Elijah's mantle.

The immediate story of that change in leadership has an out-of-time quality to it in the vein of that galaxy "far, far away." In the preceding chapter, the reign of Ahaziah ends with his death and we're in that liminal time in history before the new reign of Jehoram begins; Elijah's ministry is at its conclusion, and Elisha has a set of tests in practical prophetics before beginning his. There's a feeling of mystery here, with prophetic choruses hushed and strange visions which are to be unseen or perhaps to be seen and fire and wonders in the sky.

Elisha is at first unsure of himself, exhibiting his reliance on his mentor. Along the way, though, he begins to demonstrate his worthiness: he is loyal to his guide and stays the course even when the trek seems to meander willy-nilly; he passes the test of seeing and inherits the double share he requested. In the several verses immediately following the story, he acts as powerful prophet in his own right. Mentee no more.