

Change and continuity

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[0:00] Well, thank you very much for your welcome and thank you for reading from 1 Kings.! We're going to turn again to that passage that was read in 1 Kings.

And the other one was this. So when I found out I would be coming this Sunday and next Sunday and Christmas morning and God willing, the first three Sundays in January, this seemed like a really appropriate sermon to preach today.

And particularly this idea of change and continuity, continuity and change. There's been quite a few differences over the past few weeks.

Changes in the life of the church and over a longer period of time, personnel changes in the life of the church. Phil has his farewell Sunday, possibly returning in the new year in a different capacity. It's different. And people welcome change and people welcome continuity. The new chancellor in Germany, Olav Schatz, yeah, I think it's how it's pronounced.

[1:39] He's been referred to as Angela Merkel 2.0. Because they've worked together, they know each other, and he probably will seek to follow a number of her policies.

But he's in coalition with some very different politicians who will be looking for some changes that represent their constituency. And in life, that's the way it works, isn't it?

We have a mixture of continuity and change. Things that are familiar, things that are unfamiliar. They say in church life, don't they, that if everything changes too quickly, people become disorientated.

If nothing changes, people become disengaged. And that's true, isn't it? It's true in church. It's true in life generally. If everything is the same old, same old, what do we have to get up for in the morning?

If everything is frantically changing, where do we find our coordinates? Where do we discover the way to move from A to B to C to D? Just too much change is a challenge, but change is so helpful.

[2:48] Now, we're here in Advent as we reflect on Christmas. And of course, one of the messages that we'll be thinking about is this remarkable sense of change and continuity.

We think about the creator of all things becoming a human being. We think of the source of life, breathing the breath of life as a baby in Bethlehem.

The Lord of all, the creator of all, living amongst his creatures. What a remarkable example of changing continuity.

Jesus, the son of God, true God, becoming true man. Living amongst us and dying upon a cross. How remarkable. Now, one of my favorite books is a book called *The Adventure of Living*. And in that book, the doctor, Paul Tonier, speaks about how important it is in life to have a combination of adventure and security.

[3:55] He says, you know, it's important to have a blend of those two things. If you have too much adventure, you die of excitement or exhaustion. If you have too much security, you die of boredom.

And therefore, for human beings, it's very important to have a combination of both those things. Enough adventure in life to really engage us and feel that life is worth living.

That we have the excitement and the buzz and the joy of life. But enough security to feel that our feet are on a firm foundation. And we're not unstable.

Adventure and security. Human beings need that. Churches need that. Yes, we really want to be there on a Sunday morning.

We really want to be amongst God's people. Because we're fearful of missing out. We're fearful of missing out when God might break in.

[4:55] When God might be amongst his people and show himself in a magnificent way. We're fearful that God might do something, say something, very special and fresh.

And we're not there. But we also value the security of knowing that there are certain things we believe.

There are certain things that we do. And we keep to those things. We don't change what we believe. We don't change the things that are the foundations of the church.

Those things stand firm. But sometimes the way we do church, our emphasis, our tone, the choices that we make concerning our activities, they do change.

Because life changes. COVID has made us change the way we do church. Church, for many people, is unrecognizable from what it was a couple of years ago.

[5:53] Some of those things might be perceived to be good. And some of those things may be less than good. But that's the way life so often works. Now, where are we in the story of this man Elijah that we've read about in 1 Kings chapter 19?

He's had his finest hour. The finest hour of him being the prophet of God, challenging the prophets of Baal. The true one, challenging the false one. And truth has prevailed.

But as often happens, when we have a magnificent moment, often it's followed by a time of uncertainty and sometimes a time of darkness.

And the finest hour is replaced by the darkest hour in Elijah's life. The darkest hour was the title of a film made about Winston Churchill, about eight days in the spring of 1940.

A very important time. A time when he gave his, we will fight them on the beaches speech. But it was also a dark hour. A dark hour of uncertainty for the nation.

[7:08] Winston Churchill was a man who experienced darkness of soul. Black dog, as he called it. Life is not always wall-to-wall sunshine.

In human life, in the Christian life, in church, sometimes we have seasons of light and sometimes we have seasons that comparatively seem like darkness.

Elijah, at the beginning of chapter 19, prays that he might die. He is overcome. Some people call it burnout. Some people call it spiritual depression.

But it's just the way that human beings do swing, particularly at times of great emotional intensity. We're kind of up.

The adrenaline surges through our veins. And then the occasion of challenge passes. And we find ourselves like a washing-up cloth, screwed up and thrown in the corner of the kitchen.

[8:10] All energy and life gone. Now, life is like that, isn't it? Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 of having treasure in jars of clay.

Human beings are very complicated things. Human beings, Paul says, are like those who are clay pots that very easily crack.

That contain treasure. We are a mixture of glory and dust. That's what we are as human beings. And here we have an example in the life of Elijah.

A man who has proclaimed God's word and performed great actions of spiritual power, yet has recognized that he is a human being.

Weak and frail. One of the things you notice, isn't it, when you read through the Acts of the Apostles and you read about the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul, a magnificent warrior for the faith, but also we find him in Corinth, fearful about the challenges of that evil place.

[9:25] Because we are human. What a remarkable thing it is to combine these two things. The spirit of God and human flesh.

It's always a challenge, isn't it, in DIY terms or engineering terms, to try and adhere one substance to another. That's really, usually, the engineering challenge.

That's where the potential weakness, where the potential break is often going to come. We have treasure in jars of clay.

And that makes us both potentially invincible, but also extremely vulnerable. That's what we are. We are human beings.

And that's why, of course, we need to recognize that our sufficiency comes from God, that in him we live and move and have our being. He gives us life and breath and everything else. We are human beings hanging on a tiny thread, a thread that is sustained by mighty God, a gracious God. [10:38] Outside of him we are nothing. And, of course, these moments of weakness, and the moment of weakness here for Elijah reminded him of his dependence upon God.

And, of course, that's true of a church, isn't it? Churches close. Churches turn into nightclubs and carpet warehouses and cafes. The church is a precarious place.

Churches, no churches ought to work. What a strange combination they are of people from different backgrounds and different personalities. They ought not to work, but they do work by God's grace, because he has mastered the art of combining the two substances, the spirit and the weakness of human flesh.

Churches. So, Elijah feels vulnerable. He asks that he might die. And what does God do for him? Well, really these verses that we read at the end of chapter 19 are what God does for him. He'd said in verse 10 and 14, I am the only one left.

[11:51] And we can sometimes feel like that, can't we? In a family, in a church, in a neighborhood, in a city like Brighton, we kind of feel that we're kind of outnumbered.

I alone and left. And, of course, what you need when you feel isolated is a friend, isn't it? When you are feeling alone and the burden is too heavy to carry, you need a companion.

And what God gives to Elijah is a companion, a friend. He gives to him Elisha. And what a remarkable calling this calling of Elisha is.

It's so simple. It is something that doesn't require words. It's interesting, isn't it, how human beings are able to communicate without words.

You know, we know what it's about. Or maybe someone at the back here, if I'm speaking for too long.

[13:00] We know about communication that is not vocal. So Elisha takes his coat off and he throws it over the shoulders of Elisha.

No words are spoken. No demands are made. No instructions are offered. Just a coat around the shoulder.

But, of course, you know, this is just a very ordinary jacket. 20 pounds. 15 years ago. Yes. I like a bargain. But just guess it was a police jacket.

It was the jacket of the superintendent of a particular police station. And placed around the shoulders of a constable.

Now, I think that, you know, you wouldn't need to be a genius to kind of say that maybe the superintendent was saying, you know, one day you will wear this. The putting of the coat of the prophet around the shoulders of Elisha was saying, you know, you are going to do my job.

[14:22] This is going to be your job in the future. It's a significant moment. What about you? What was the significant moment that made you feel that your life was going to change in terms of your relationship with God?

What was the significant moment where it felt as though God was drawing near to you and saying, you know, I think things are going to be different in your life in the future.

I want things to change. I want there to be a new relationship, a new agenda in your life. I want your priorities to be transformed. What was that significant moment?

Maybe it was coming to church for the first time or meeting a Christian for the first time. Or that kind of neon light moment when something from scripture just lit up in your eyes and imagination.

And you suddenly realize that God is real, that Jesus has been sent, and he can be known and experienced in a powerful and personal way.

[15:26] You see, what's happening is that the baton is being passed on. The baton is being passed on from Elijah, who has done his stint as the prophet, who has kind of given himself, who's kind of felt worn down in the process.

And he's handing on the baton to a new generation, a new leader. Elijah passes his coat, his prophetic mantle, over to Elisha and commissions him with this unspoken commission to stand in

his place to be the prophet in the future.

General William Booth said this, It is good to know that if we are faithful to the present, God will sort out the future. We do the job he gives us to do now, and he will make sure that there will be those to carry on that work in the future.

And that's right, isn't it? You know, you deal faithfully with the now, believing that the God of all time and eternity will deal with the then.

You know, we need not doubt that God is at work amongst us and providing for us, that he knows what we need.

[16:52] He knows what we need as a church. He knows about our personnel and our resources. He knows about those things, and he's able to do something about it. The change, as we read in, just going to flick through just for a moment to chapter 2 of 2 Kings, and that incident there in chapter 2 from verse 12, where Elisha sees Elijah ascending on chariots of fire, after the cloak has been used to divide the water so that they can walk over it as dry ground.

And Elisha retrieves the cloak of Elijah that's been dropped from the chariots of fire. And Elisha strikes the water, and the water divides.

And he's used the cloak to do just what Elijah did with the cloak. And he asks a question, it's an important question, where now is the Lord God the God of Elijah?

We might ask, where now is the Lord God the God of Philip Wells? Well, he's here, isn't he? He is here amongst us. That's very important for us to recognize, isn't it?

God buries his servants, but his work continues. God moves people on, yet he continues to work. That's so important to recognize.

[18:37] Where now is the Lord God, the God of Elijah? I think in some ways that's the most important question in the story of Elijah and Elisha.

It's not about human heroes. The Bible is not about human heroes. It's about God the hero. And God the hero continues to be the same, even though the characters on the pages of the story change.

That's the continuity, isn't it, of God's work. That's the continuity that we see here, even amidst the change. So what next then, turning back to 1 Kings 19?

What next? There's no bargaining between Elisha and Elijah. They don't have a conversation about the future at this stage.

Simply kind of accept the mantle given. And there is an instant response. When you ask people a question, when you ask people to do something, usually there's a bit of a test, isn't there?

[19:47] You ask someone to do something, and there is a pause. And, you know, in that pause, lots of things can happen. But simply, there's going to be a yes or a no.

Maybe, sometimes, a maybe. But Elisha was plain. This was a call. And he was going to respond. And he was going to respond instantly. You know, this particular story reminds me of how Jesus comes to his disciples on the first occasion. And he comes to them when they're mending nets by their boats, their fishermen.

And he says to them, you know, leave your nets. Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they, likewise, without delay, immediately followed Jesus.

You know, when you find someone who is worth following, you're willing to leave everything in order to follow him. Suddenly, nothing seems as important.

[20:51] As following him. Whether it be Elijah here, or Jesus in the Gospels. When you find that person, you must follow.

You must trust. It's like finding the treasure in the field. It's like finding the most precious pearl. It's like finding the reason why you've been created.

The reason why you're here on planet Earth. Suddenly, the missing piece slots in and everything becomes clear. They left without delay.

What about this moment in Brighton? What about this moment here? How is God calling you? What is God inviting you to do?

Maybe it is to acknowledge Jesus. Trust in Jesus. Maybe it is to do something in the life of the church. Or to speak to someone about Jesus.

[21:50] To invite someone to a Christmas activity. To step up to the plate in some area of service. What is God asking you to do?

Elisha asks that he might be able to go back and say goodbye to his parents. Now, I don't know if it reminds you of a Gospel story. There's a Gospel story where Jesus said to certain people that they were to follow him.

And someone says, no, I need to go and say goodbye to my parents. And Jesus says, no, you can't do that. You need to come now. And it's interesting to kind of compare and contrast these two things.

It's likely that the man in the Gospel story, his father was actually dead. And he was saying, I need to go home to say goodbye to my parents.

But his father was dead. Now, Elisha, his parents were very much alive. He wasn't going home to kiss a corpse. He was going home to say goodbye to his family.

[23:01] And to burn his bridges. And to move into a new future. Elisha's call. And the four things we could say about it.

It is costly. He came from a wealthy family. He had 12 oxen. You know, I know that in Brighton Hove there are some biggish houses. But to have 12 cars parked in the drive, you need to have a considerable property.

12 oxen. And 12 plows. This was an extremely wealthy person. Just like, you know, with James and John and Peter and Andrew.

The fact that they had boats meant that they were also a wealthy, well-resourced family. They were doing well, thank you very much. It was a very costly thing.

And it always is a costly thing to do what God wants us to do. It was a courageous thing. He was associating with Elijah, who has been called a troubler in Israel.

[24:03] You know, it's a little bit like handcuffing yourself to someone who's got a kind of a bomb attached to them.

This is a courageous, a dangerous thing. It's complete. Elisha is 100% man. He's working with these 11 other people who are using oxen to plow the fields.

And he takes his, we read there, in verse 21. He took his yokebox, slaughtered them.

He burned them, boiled them. The plowing equipment to cook the meat and give it to the people. And they ate. There's no going back, is there?

He sells his business. He sells his interest in what he's doing in the present. He is now going to do something completely different. He says goodbye to the past and hello to the future that God has for him.

[25:09] And it's clear. It's a very clear response to a call. Elisha is saying, I know what I need to do. I need to break from these old arrangements. And I need to do something that is brand new.

And then he set out to follow Elijah. And he became his attendant. He assisted him. He became his servant.

Now, that doesn't seem entirely glamorous. This is what you might call being a bag carrier. A gopher. It's not the most glamorous looking role. Being a servant isn't always perceived to be something which is attractive to us.

But service is a very special thing. In 2 Kings 3, verse 11, Elisha is described as a person who has poured water on the hands of Elijah.

Now, this kind of gives you images of kind of India with kind of people, you know, making sure you can breathe with fresh air. And people coming in with a cold drink when you need it. Elisha was serving.

[26:21] I read a week or so ago a comment by a Christian leader. And he said, what is the most attractive quality in a Christian leader?

What is the most attractive quality in a Christian leader? And he said that he felt that the most attractive quality in a Christian leader is that they are bigger on the inside than they are on the outside.

Just like the TARDIS in Doctor Who. There are some people, and they look big, flashy, special on the outside.

But the more you get to know them, the less of them there actually is. It's a bit like peeling an onion. You take away layer after layer and end up with nothing much apart from tears.

But an attractive leader is someone who is bigger on the inside than on the outside.

[27:29] And something that demonstrates that bigness of quality is the willingness to serve. It is the small mind who feels that they always need to be served.

It is the big mind and the big heart that realizes that they exist not just for themselves, but they exist for others. And of course this is serving like Jesus, isn't it?

That's exactly what Jesus, the creator of all things who becomes a human being, comes to do. We read in Mark 10 in verse 45, The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

This Jesus, like Elisha, was willing to wash feet, wash hands, wash feet.

He was willing to serve, and his service culminated by his self-offering upon the cross. We're going to sing in a few moments. From heaven you came, helpless babe.

[28:41] Entered our world, your glory veiled. Not to be served, but to serve and give your life that we might live. This is our God, the servant king.

He calls us now to follow him. To bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the servant king. And it is remarkable as we think about this Christmas time and the coming of the Lord Jesus.

To see the parallels between Elijah and Elisha and John the Baptist and Jesus. Elijah means the Lord, the Lord, or God, he is my Lord.

Elisha means my God is my salvation. Elijah was noted for being stern and tough in his dealings with people.

Elisha, throughout his ministry, seems to have a much more gentle approach to people. Although there are exceptions. A bunch of rough teenagers who try and insult him, for example.

[29:51] You can read about that in 2 Kings chapter 2 in a quiet moment. But generally speaking, that is the case.

God is my salvation. A bit like Jesus. God to the rescue. In fact, the very last thing that Elisha does is after his death, that his graveside becomes a place of life-giving.

To someone who falls into his grave. Very soon, we'll be celebrating the fact that Jesus has been born.

You shall give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. Elisha, the servant. His name means my God is salvation.

Points to a greater servant. A servant of the Lord who comes to save us. Save us from our guilt.

[30:56] Save us from impending condemnation. And saves us from emptiness and rootlessness. Saves us from a life turned in on itself.

Jesus is the Savior. When Jesus came to earth, he came to his home church, his home synagogue in Nazareth.

And he read from the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. And he read these words. The spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me that I might proclaim good news to the poor. And when he'd read this, he said, today, today these words are fulfilled in your hearing.

And people are excited to know that the one who was proclaiming life and favor had come. The one who was proclaiming an uplift to those who are broken and marginalized had come.

The one who could rescue people from their lostness had come. But when he'd finished that time in Nazareth, the people in Nazareth wanted to kill him.

[32:00] Now it can happen, can't it? I guess there are probably venues in Brighton where some people have felt that they've died. You know, a crowd can be fickle, can't it?

A crowd can be unpredictable. You know, what did Jesus do to get killed in the synagogue? His bit of advice for preachers. What do preachers do to get death threats when they're preaching?

Well, he mentioned Elijah and Elisha in Luke chapter 4. He said, when God was working through Elijah and Elisha, you know, there were lots of widows in Israel.

But God sent Elijah to a widow in Sidon that she might be helped. An outsider. And there were plenty of people with skin diseases in Israel at the time of Elisha.

But God sent Naaman, a Syrian, an enemy, to receive cleansing and a fresh start through the ministry of Elisha.

[33:02] So, Jesus comes, not for a particular elite, those who can kind of fill in all the boxes on the form.

He comes for those who are helpless and hopeless, lost and disorientated. To rescue us. To bring us to himself. What next? What next?

Well, you fill in that bit, don't you? I've not got words that can describe what you will do next as a result of hearing the sermon.

What next might be nothing. That's possible, isn't it? That's the way people respond to many words. Do remember to pick up those things.

[34:02] Please do sweep up the yard. Oh, remember about the washing up. Oh, don't forget the bacon. Amen. Sometimes nothing is what we do with what God says to us.

But we think of Elisha. Elisha, without words, was summoned by Elijah to follow. To step into his destiny. To step in the future that God had for him.

And he did something. See, ultimately, when we're spoken to, we can either say yes or no.

Or maybe. If it's a maybe today, chat with me afterwards. Let's see if we might help to point you towards a yes.

A yes to life. A yes to hope. A yes to a future. A yes to a change that liberates and does not bind. Let's pray together.

[35:11] Father God, we come to you and thank you for the opportunity to draw near to you in prayer. We thank you that you are the true living God.

We thank you that when we speak to you, we touch reality. Because you are real. We thank you, Father, that you have made us and you've made our world. And we thank you that you communicate with us.

We thank you that you've come amongst us in your son, the Lord Jesus. And Father God, we would pray that as we reflect upon what it is to listen to your word and respond to you.

That you'll help us to listen. And you'll help us to receive your saving promises. Father, we thank you that there is freedom to be had in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we pray that you'll help us to choose freedom. I think there's life to be had in Jesus. And we pray that you'll help us to choose life. There is hope and a future in Jesus.

[36:18] Help us to choose hope and a future. We pray. Help us to come to you and help us to receive from you.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.