

Does anyone remember the singer-song writer, Jim Croce?



“Workin’ at the Car Wash Blues” and “Bad, Bad, Leroy Brown” and the like? A line in one of his songs went, “You don’t tug on Superman’s cape.”

Superman’s cape?



Ever wonder, “Why did Superman — and Batman and Robin and countless other ‘super-heroes’ — wear capes?” I mean, Superman’s cape played no role in anything he did; it fluttered behind him when he flew, but it wasn’t the reason he could fly. And unless it was made of some super, super thin material, wouldn’t it have shown under Clark Kent’s suit coat as some sort of weird bulge? Wouldn’t Lois Lane have been able to put two and two together early on, and not needed always simply to *wonder* whether Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet, was actually Superman?

It would have been different if Superman were some *bon vivant* like Oscar Wilde; I think a cape was a dress fashion accessory for turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century men of fashion, but even for them, it was essentially useless.



Essentially useless. Oscar Wilde could not have thrown guess Walter Raleigh’s cape was somewhat useful — thrown his cape down and stopped the Thames from cross over.



his cape down — oops, I Oscar Wilde could not have flowing, so that he could

No, I know of no cape that could match what Elijah *and* Elisha achieved with the *mantle* of Elijah in our reading from the Hebrew Bible, the last of the Elijah stories — Elijah is, after all, carried away to heaven in our story — the last of the Elijah stories that we shall read this year.



Incidentally, before I get to the real point of today’s message, I do want to draw a parallel with the story told by the writer of Luke, repeated in Acts, of Jesus’ *ascension*. The story, not told elsewhere in the gospels, ties Jesus to Elijah; the only other biblical character who does not die on earth is Enoch, way back in the pre-history stories early [chapter 5] in Genesis.

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Now, I really do not know whether Elijah's *mantle* was a useful bit of clothing — well, I mean useful as clothing; it was obviously great for stopping the flow of a river — or a symbol of his being a prophet of the Lord. But the story we read today is one that gives us the concepts of passing or handing-down one's *mantle*, or of picking up the *mantle*, or that indicate that someone is the successor of another for some purpose. Mickey Mantle sort of "picked up the mantle" *oops*, no pun intended, "of Joe DiMaggio," for baseball lovers.

So Elisha ends up with Elijah's cape, his cloak. Elisha will go on such that 2 Kings tells us stories of him as an important prophet, but we do not hear any more about that dam — I mean, it can stop the flow of water, so it is a "dam" without an "n" — cape.

Of course, the story we read is not about Elisha's inheriting a cape, or *mantle* if you think I am playing too loose with the text, it is about Elisha's inheriting something that Elijah says it is not his to determine: his *spirit!* Those of us who set up wills and trusts knowing that someday not a literal but figurative chariot will come and whisk us away, know that we can bequeath bank accounts and, yes, *capes* to others, we can even bequeath a *mantle*, but we can neither bequeath our spirit nor be assured that the mantle will be picked up.

We can feel the spirit, we can will that someone will pick it up, but we cannot be sure that will happen.

And if you want an example, I give you most any — not every, but most any — church in the world that is at least thirty or more years old. I give you all of the denominations that make up what is called "Mainline Protestantism," and for those who are not sure what the "Mainline" means, it simply refers to the suburban railroad line running north - northwest out of Philadelphia, and includes Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, most Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, UCC, and American Baptists. If I have forgotten anyone, I am sorry, but my point is, the organized Church of Jesus Christ — and if there is no organization, what is there to work on his behalf, — the organized Church of Jesus Christ may have been handed the *cloak* and willed the spirit, but it has not done a very effective job of picking up the *mantle* nor responding to that spirit.

If you need a more specific example, look no further than the empty pews that represent bodies that I assume once filled this sanctuary, or look next Sunday, when we worship in Florence, at a somewhat smaller number of empty pews, which do tend to be filled to capacity during the winter, but even were they filled to capacity all the time as in the winter, the numbers likely would not sustain, or at least grow, that particular church.

The cloaks, and I am purposely not using *mantle* for a moment, can be identified as the buildings that were provided by those who went before us, but we, as do most, fail to understand that the reason the buildings came to exist, was because of the *spirit* that inhabited those who built them.

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I am not going to turn earlier generations into better Christians than are we; that does them too much credit and is not fair to us, but our situations are different from theirs. We all know there was a time when, to use the line from that baseball movie, "Field of Dreams," "If you build it, they will come." At one time, *it* was too easily understood to be a church *building*; Elijah's cape or cloak, if you will, is or are the church buildings provided to us. But although the story says that cloak stopped the flow of the river, the cloaks provided us have done nothing to stem the tide of cultural changes that have emphasized material well-being, selfishness, and self-centeredness at the expense of healthy souls and loving one's neighbor, cultural changes that characterize most of the world outside these walls.

And I would be remiss in ignoring the negative impact of those who believe the Church exists solely for social and political purposes.

For whatever reason, and no local explanations or excuses are ultimately relevant, we have been unsuccessful, even if we have tried, in taking the spirit of Elijah and giving it to the people with whom we share this larger community. We do — and I am speaking of both the congregations which are gathered here — we do a pretty decent job of living together as instructed by the one whom, even if indirectly, Elijah foretold, though not in words and not knowing so, our Lord and Savior, Jesus. We do a pretty good job of living *together* as Jesus would have us live. I see members of the Florence congregation driving and visiting members of the Florence congregation, and members of the Coolidge congregation driving and visiting members of the Coolidge congregation. This, I might add, is far more what church is than are these four walls and this lovely ceiling. But to pick up what was left us that we too easily define by two church buildings is not enough to assume, to pick up, the mantle of Elijah, and simply to stay within those buildings is not enough to say that we have picked up the *spirit* of Elijah, let alone the double measure Elisha sought.

We are called to be disciples of our Lord who wants us to go into the world *and to make disciples of all peoples!* Jesus never says a word about our simply gathering together as an end in itself.

Here is what I am saying in a nutshell: we as two individual congregations, we as one combined congregation, are called to pick up the cloak of Elijah and to respond to the Great Commission of our Lord and Savior. To pick up that cloak, *to assume that mantle*, we must respond to what the Spirit of the Lord is calling us to be and to do, and that is *not* simply to struggle to stay as we have been, *not* simply to be satisfied with surviving a few more years, but constantly to remember that God makes all things new, and so we may be — I suspect are — called to try something new..

Are we going to be with God? Elisha did not remain by the river wondering what to do as Elijah was carried away, but responded to God's call to serve. Can we pick up the *mantle*, pick up Elijah's cloak, heck, can we put on Superman's cape, and go out of our comfort zones and familiar buildings to do likewise?

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Can we pick up the spirit of Elijah picked up by Elisha?

In the words that mean, "may it be so," I say, "Amen."