



Have you ever played with a decoder ring? Do you even know what a decoder ring is? A decoder ring physically aligns a puzzling message—an encoded message—with the code’s encryption key so that you can make sense of the message. Without the decoder ring, you simply can’t understand what was intended.

I thought of decoder rings this week when I reflected on our gospel lesson. On first reading the text is very perplexing, coded (in a way) by the large shift in worldview that has occurred since Jesus’ time and ours.

The perplexing message is this: Jesus was on his final journey to Jerusalem. He kept inviting people to follow him. They made excuses, and Jesus was very harsh in his responses. All of Samaria rejected Jesus, so James and John offered, seemingly, to commit genocide by calling down fire on the Samaritans. The one person who volunteered to follow Jesus seemingly was rejected by him.

Luckily, our lectionary provides the decoder ring we need to decipher what’s going on in our gospel lesson. The key is our Old Testament lesson, in which God sent the great prophet Elijah to anoint his successor prophet.

Maybe you know all about Elijah. For those who don’t, Elijah’s most vivid prophetic action was to call down fire from heaven to prove to those who worshiped idols, who the true God is. So, maybe James’ and John’s offer to pray down fire from heaven wasn’t to smite the Samaritans, but rather is the clue we need to point us to Elijah.



In our Old Testament lesson, Elijah found Elisha plowing his field. There was no change-of-command ceremony. Elijah didn’t even ask Elisha if he wanted to become a prophet. Instead, he simply threw his outer cloak—his mantle—over Elisha. As we say even to this day, “the mantle was passed.”

Elisha showed that his following of Elijah was irrevocable. He kissed his parents good-bye, killed the farm animals, burned the tools, and threw a big good-bye party for himself, inviting all the neighbors. There would be no turning back for Elisha; Elijah’s mantle was well and truly passed.

From this story we learn acceptable responses to God's call. **First**, say good-bye to life as you knew life. Things just won't be the same. **Second**, get rid of everything disposable that might hold you back, might call you back. **Then**, get going; just do whatever God is calling you to do.

With this decoder ring, let's turn to our gospel lesson. There we see that Jesus' days were numbered, as Elijah's had been. Elijah had been taken up to heaven by God, as Jesus was soon to be. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, and you all know what would happen to him there (just as Jesus knew what was to be).

Now, throughout the gospels we see that people were always following Jesus. Not just his disciples. The crowd that followed Jesus wanted to see what spectacular things would happen next. Or they wanted him to heal them, or provide a preemptive healing (a blessing) for their children. They liked being around Jesus, because he and his disciples made them feel good, made them feel like they were loved. Sometimes they even got fed, both with loaves and fishes and with bread from heaven.



Jesus was always inviting his followers to step out of the crowd, and to become his disciples. Our gospel lesson makes clear that, as Jesus approached Jerusalem, he stepped up the intensity of his calling. Jesus needed lots of successors, lots of disciples.

In response, there were a lot of excuses. My favorite excuse is the hardest to understand, "Just let me go bury my father first."

Sounds reasonable enough—even Elisha got to kiss his parents good-bye. Except I get the inkling that maybe this guy's father wasn't dead yet. Or maybe not even ill yet. Sort of, "Sure, Jesus, I'll follow you, YEAH, I'll follow you. Let me retire first. Let me raise my children first. Let me be senior warden first. Let me, let me, let me..." You get the idea.

Well, luckily for us, Jesus was able to throw his mantle on SOME who followed him—or we wouldn't even know that God had been born among us. But we do know, thanks to those who DID step up after Jesus had gone, stepped up—accepted Jesus' mantle—and told others.

So now we know all that we need to know about today's lesson, at least all that we need to know to understand what happened WAY back then. But here we



are, followers of Jesus who gather week after week to reap the benefits of following him. Week after week we:

- Enjoy the fellowship of those who gather around Jesus.
- Receive the miracle that's dispensed at this Table, the miracle that changes our lives forever.
- Leave here feeling loved and refreshed and ready to tackle a new week.
- And sometimes, through this miracle, we act in Jesus' name. After all—

I've heard that Grace Church is not just

- 1) A center for worship and fellowship AND
- 2) A school for discipleship and stewardship; BUT ALSO
- 3) A community for healing and outreach

Our lesson today tells us that, as essential as worshiping and fellowshiping and schooling and healing are, they simply are incomplete, if we never take what we receive here out into the world, and invite the world to receive Jesus, also.

At our Bishop's Spring Conference last month, we heard from Michael Harvey—who founded the worldwide Back to Church movement. Michael told us that 90% — 90% — of **all Christians** refuse to invite **anyone else** to attend church with them—EVER— much less tell ANYBODY outside of their family members about how knowing Jesus has made a difference in their lives.

Like the people in today's gospel lesson, we make all kinds of excuses. We worry about results, when really results are God's job, not ours. We worry that we will **in some way** be diminished in the eyes of others, if we invite them to share in the ONE THING that has absolutely transformed our lives (Jesus HAS absolutely transformed your life, hasn't he?). Maybe what we really fear is that those we invite will say "yes," and we somehow will run out of the Bread of Life. (HMFPH!)

Jesus has passed his mantle to you and to me. And—God only knows—our time here is short. We, too, like Elijah and Jesus, are near to ascending to God. Who will we pass Jesus' mantle on to? Who will we tell about Jesus?