

## **Feast of the Ascension**

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*Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth, for I will proclaim the Name of the Lord, and ascribe greatness to our God. Deut 32:1ff*

Hanging in my closet at home, I have a chasuble my mother made for my ordination to the priesthood. She didn't just make a chasuble, to be honest. She created a special chasuble designed with special overlays so I could change colors with the seasons (Red, White, Violet, and Green). Each overlay is unique to the season (and back in those days we hadn't gotten into Advent Blue, so it just has the four colors). But in addition to this marvelous chasuble, she included matching stoles.

When it came to sewing, Mom was a wizard. I kid you not; with needle and thread, she was a real wizard. She had never made church-wear before, but as I was preparing for ordination, she went down to St. Matthew's (Brown's Point, Tacoma) and checked out their liturgical finery to see what kind of materials they had, what sort of stitches they used, basic measurements – everything she needed because, frankly, it didn't

seem there were any patterns available. So she had to do her own designing and everything.

When she was finished, I was ordained, and she presented this wonderful gift I hadn't expected or anticipated. In a very real sense of the word, I was clothed from on high with signs of the office to which I had been called and ordained.

Although I haven't worn them in a while, when I do, I find my mother is with me. I carry her with me when I put them on. *The chasuble, by the way, is that thing that looks a bit like a poncho. It covers you front and back, and the priest puts it on at the Offertory, and that lets the people in church know we're transitioning from the liturgy of the Word to the liturgy of the Altar.*

And the Chasuble is sort of like the **Invisibility Cloak you see in the Harry Potter series**. With the invisibility cloak, when you're wearing it, people around you can't see you or it. The chasuble is like that, but with one major difference: When the priest puts it on, you can see the cloak, but the person inside becomes liturgically invisible, and the congregation sees through the priest and **into the heart of Jesus**,

who says, *“This is my Body ... This is my Blood.”* That’s why it doesn’t matter if the priest standing at the altar is male or female, Jew or Greek, Gay or Straight, Slave or Free, or what language they speak, because it isn’t them standing at the altar, but Jesus. **It’s not magic; it’s the majesty of God.**

The chasuble is sort of like the story of Elijah in the Bible. Elijah was one of the great prophets of Israel (ca. 9th C. BCE), and before he was taken home, you remember the story, he had a disciple named Elisha, and they were like Father and Son. When the time came for Elijah to transition from this life to the next, everyone knew it, and Elisha was scared to death to let his beloved Elijah go. Everywhere they went, Elisha told him, *“I’m not letting you go. I’m not leaving you!”* And Elijah did everything he could to spare Elisha of the inevitable grief that attends death, so he finally said, *“If you see me go, you will have what you ask.”*

***Do you remember what Elisha asked for? A double portion of Elijah’s spirit. Double!***

Most of us have people we admire and love, and often we say we'd like to be half the man or half the woman they are (or were). But **Elisha doesn't want to be half**. He doesn't even want to be equal. *“You have so inspired me by your life and example, my beloved Elijah, my beloved father, I want to go on to be like you, and more!”*

Elisha isn't talking about quantity, of course. He's talking about the quality of his life, the quality of his ministry, the quality of his service, the quality of his impact in Israel to unite the tribes, despite their differences, despite their failures and idolatry, and all the rest.

*In the Middle East (during the times of Elijah and Jesus), when a patriarch died, the eldest son received a double portion of the estate. It's not just a mathematical formula. The Patriarch's mantle falls upon the shoulders of the eldest son to take on the care and support of the family, and the property. In other words, the eldest son ascends to take on the role of Patriarch, responsible for preserving and protecting the family.*

When Elijah died, Elisha saw him being carried away, and Elijah tossed him his mantle – his chasuble, if you will – and told him, “*Carry on, my son. Carry on.*”

And Elisha did.

*On a side note: There are people who have counted miracles and signs and report that Elisha actually performed twice as many as Elijah, which is a sign for us that he built on the work Elijah started, and that’s what we do, too!*

This is a long way around to getting to the Gospel today, but we have a similar story of Jesus being carried away, and even though the disciples ran off into the night when he was arrested, and hid themselves in dark places when he was tried, convicted, and executed, Jesus did not hold it against them.

**This is the story of the human race.** We know what we ought to do, but we don’t do it. We know what we shouldn’t do, but we do it anyway. We act all big, brave, and tough when we’re around our friends, but deep inside we’re shaking

in our boots and scared to death of failing or looking like fools (which we often are).

Jesus knows that, and so **in the resurrection he made it a point to pop in on his disciples from time to time to encourage them.** *“Fear Not. Be at Peace. Let Shalom fill your hearts and minds. Here, have some breakfast. Hey, my sheep are hungry. Feed them. Tend to them. Gather them. Love them.”*

For 40 days he made sure they knew he left their failures in the past and carried them into the future. He opened their eyes to what God was saying and doing, and more than that, assured them that God would continue to work in and through them, too.

Just like the story of Elijah being carried away to join the angels in heaven, we have the story of Jesus likewise re-joining God in heaven. And before he goes, he says, *“Wait here. You are the priesthood of believers. I will be sending you a new mantle, a new chasuble to cover you. When people look at you, they won’t see you when you wear my mantle, when you wear my chasuble – the Holy Spirit will cover you and people will see*

*right through you, straight to the heart of Jesus who says, This is my Body. You, You are my Body. This is my Blood. You. You are my Blood. In other words, Family! You are my family, and in my family, everybody has a place at the table. Everybody.”*

The disciples may have asked what he meant by “everybody” ... and Jesus was just as clear he didn’t mean just the people who look, act, or talk like us, but **EVERYBODY!**

You know, here at St. Paul’s and Resurrecion, we say, *“We believe God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration.”*

That’s what the Feast of the Ascension is about. It’s not about Jesus going away and abandoning us. It’s about Jesus covering us with his mantle and enabling us to continue the work Jesus began when he was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptizer, who was (for Jesus), HIS Elijah!

In a way, Jesus is OUR Elijah, and we are his Elisha; we get to build on the work of generations

that came or went before us, just as those who follow will take up the mantle and carry on this great work, in the Name of God who Creates us, God who Saves us, and God who Strengthens us for service.

May God grant us grace to be brave little Elishas and ask for more. Be careful, though. God may well say *“YES!”*

AMEN