In the last couple of weeks, hundreds and thousands of members of the Class of 2019, walked down the aisle and across the stage to receive their academic diploma. Whether it’s Kindergarten, Elementary, Junior High, High School, College, or even Post-Graduate, it’s worth something to celebrate and to cheer for, in achieving a major milestone in their lives.

As each of these graduates walked down the aisle, they brought their unique stories and journeys, joys and struggles, as well as their high hope, expectations and challenges, into whatever may be installed for them next, as they continue to pursue their excellence.

The term “Commencement” signifies not only the end of one chapter in life, but it’s also the beginning of another. It invites us to explore new opportunities and to dream new dreams for our future. We may look back and learn from our mistakes, but at the end we can only go forward and trust that God will continue to lead the way for us, as God grants us freedom to choose and make important decisions along each step of the way.

In the Old Testament passage that we read earlier, we also came across a passage of “commencement” of some sort, the “passing of the torch” as you will, between the senior prophet Elijah and the junior prophet Elisha. For years, Elijah had been mentoring for his successor to take over the leadership role. It was just a matter of time as to when that transferring of power may take place.

On this momentous occasion, Elijah was taken up into the heaven by a chariot and a horse of fire that were sent from God. Can you imagine how that scene might look like as Elijah was slowly being taken into the heaven. As a sign of this transfer of the prophetic power and God’s continuing covenant to God’s people, Elijah passed his mantle to Elisha. Prior to this Elisha had pledged that he would walk with Elijah until the end and would never leave him. Well, the end of Elijah’s era is now here, but it also marked the beginning of Elisha’s era as the prophet for the people.

The calling of Elisha shed light upon us, as to how it may relate to our own personal calling, as God’s prophets and ambassadors proclaiming God’s word into this world. Elisha was a second career prophet. Before this he was simply a farmer doing what he knew best…farming! Hey, Jesus was a carpenter by trade and many of his disciples were farmers and fishermen also. So why not? Elisha was an outsider and perhaps the least qualified person to succeed Elijah. Elisha was willing to forego his former career and answered his calling. But he did not forget to honor those who shaped him into whom he had become. There was No-Looking back when it comes to making such life-changing decision in life. But God has prepared Elisha well for this moment all along.

Elisha realized that he may not be the most qualifying candidate for this job, nevertheless he was willing to make such personal sacrifice, trusting that God will lead him in filling the gaps. He placed his obedience and trust to God above all personal gains, ambitions and achievements. It was never about him but it was all about God.

Likewise, this was not an easy decision for Elijah to make also… to hang it up and to pass on the torch to his successor. Elijah could’ve chosen someone else as his successor…someone who might be more qualified, including perhaps one of his own sons. But God called the lesser qualified Elisha instead to succeed the role of the prophet from Elijah. Elijah obeyed to the will of God and commissioned Elisha as his successor. Both Elijah and Elisha exercised their obedience and constraint in responding to God’s calling in their lives without making any hasty decision on their own. Imagine what a disaster it would’ve been if they had acted according to their own wisdom, instead of God’s.

Elisha did, however, showed sign of making a “rookie” mistake in asking Elijah to let him “***inherit a double portion of his spirit***” perhaps he was getting a little greedy and ahead of himself. Elijah quickly realized Elisha had asked for something that he could not grant, as he referred Elisha’s request back to God. It was a decision that was totally up to God and not for him to make.

**When it comes to making these life-transforming decisions, there was no turning back. We must keep going forward.** We must keep going forward and trusting in God’s wisdom and sovereignty for us all. From time to time, we might still make mistakes, but like Elisha, we trust that God validates and affirms our calling through the choices that we make, for ourselves and on behalf of others.

In the Gospel lesson that we read earlier, we came upon also a conversation among a few of Jesus’ followers regarding one’s allegiance, fidelity, and commitment. There was certainly no personal security whatsoever when it comes to following Jesus. Jesus had no money, no home, except whatever he has on his back. He would eat what was being offer to him and stay wherever he would be welcomed. Like the prophet, being a follower or disciple of Jesus was not the most glamourous job in the world. So why would anyone still choose to follow Jesus? Jesus asked this to test his disciples’ ultimate faithfulness and commitment. Are you sure you still want to do this? Were they there for the right reason and motivation or was it for some personal ulterior motivation and not to satisfy their own personal ambition, pride or ego?

As one of Jesus’ followers replied, “*I will follow you wherever you go!”* Then another replied, “*I will follow you, Lord, but let me firs say goodbye to those at my home. Let me finish what I need to do first, THEN I’ll come back to follow you.”* On the latter, Jesus replied “*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)* When it comes to following Jesus, there is no looking back. God desires a total commitment and unconditional surrendering of our hearts.

Furthermore, our commitment to Jesus transcends across all barriers, even if it means we are being placed outside of our comfort zone or being rejected, mocked and ridiculed by others, as the disciples and Jesus experienced as they crossed through the hostile territory of Samaria. Instead of condemning those who rejected them, the disciples James and John suggested to Jesus by *“commanding fire to come down from heaven and consuming them.”*

Thankfully the cooler head prevailed. Jesus took the less confrontation and more merciful approach. He simply un-dust his sandals and moved on to the next village where they would be welcomed.

It is certainly not easy to be the modern-day prophets, as deliverers of God’s message of hope, love, and peace. Not everyone is going to receive us with an opened arm, but that should not discourage us from trying and extending God’s invitation to others. We must never forget that ultimately it is God who would deliver salvation to God’s people and not upon our own doings. We are simply servants and messengers of God’s message of hope and love in this seemingly hopeless and desperate world.

Perhaps the more relevant questions that we need to ask ourselves today are: **What would our response be when the mantle was about to fall on our shoulders? How can we, as a church, bring relevance to God’s prophetic words, in meeting the needs of the people? What shall the role of the church be, when many around us are being socially marginalized and are crying out for God’s mercy, justice and grace?**

Two weeks ago while I was on vacation, I got to attend Sunday worship service in one of the most historic churches in Washington, DC, located right downtown only about 3 blocks away from the White House. *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church*. This was the church that many past presidents, including the most notable Abraham Lincoln, walked over from the White House on Sunday morning to worship. As a matter of fact, we even got a chance to sit in the same favorite pew that Lincoln always sat. I thought that was pretty cool.

But besides their presidential notoriety, NYAPC has over the years been best known for its advocacy work for social justice when it comes to meeting the needs of its communities, especially when it comes to address the needs of the homeless individuals, the LGBTQ communities, as well as providing legal assistance to immigrants, right in the hearts of downtown Washington, DC.

So on that Sunday morning, arriving about an hour before the service at 11. I walked into the wrong entrance of the church and into their social hall down on the 1st floor. I went there because I heard a lot of noise being made with many people going in and out. But as it turned out it was a food pantry and distribution center of clothes and personal hygiene items for anyone who needs a hot-meal, relief in the bathroom or a shower, a little bit of air-conditioning, or simply some human dignity recognition that God still loves them. There was also some guitar music being played and prayers being spoken, and individual needs being lifted up through the many volunteers who gave their time and energy in serving the communities, and not for themselves. This all took place right before the regular Sunday morning worship down below in the basemen social hall, kind of like what we have.

This ministry reminds us all that God’s work does not take a vacation, even on a Sunday morning, and that we are here to serve God and others, and not being served. It’s not about what we get out of towards our own benefits, but what we contribute and share with others. Thanks to the generosity of these faithful servants and volunteers, the people are being fed both physically and spiritually, even on the day of Sabbath. Jesus would probably have done the same thing as well.

As I was ready to leave after our worship service up in the sanctuary, I noticed there was a banner that was hung on the outside of the building, reminding all worshippers and visitors what their ultimate calling is, taken from Micah 6:8 ***“What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”***

As I conversed with one of its church members, extending my appreciation for the works that their church has been actively doing over the years for its community all around, even in the absence of the head-of-staff due to his retirement, that member humbly replied, “*there is ‘no looking back’ now, we must keep going forward! God’s work never ends! God has called us to be the ministers of his people. There’s no looking back now!*”

Although we may or may not have the personnel and financial resources like *New York Avenue Presbyterian Church* to carry out that scale of ministry and outreach, but like God calling upon Elisha to fill the huge sandals of Elijah, God looks for the availability of our hearts, as God will provide us with the necessary resources AND the courage to conduct God’s ministry for the interest of God’s people. Let us not only be the hearer of God’s Words but be the doers of them as well.

What barriers and challenges might be standing before us right now? Barriers that prevent us from saying “YES” in following Jesus. What necessary steps must we take on in overcoming those fears that inhibited our growth and advancement towards God’s kingdom? These are the challenges that God has placed upon each of our hearts today.

As that church member said, *“when it comes to following Christ and doing God’s work, there is no looking back, we must keep on moving forward.”* Let us pray and trust that the Spirit will continue to lead us, and send us new vision and hope in the furthering of God’s kingdom here on earth. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Luke 9:61-62* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)