

"No Horsing Around"

2 Kings 2:1-18, Matthew 11:2-6

[65-title] Welcome and prayer

"What in the world am I doing here?" Have you ever had one of those moments? For me, it was back in college during my first and only serious attempt to learn to ride a horse. There are probably some of you here today who ride horses. Good for you. I, however, belong to a special group of people who not only cannot ride horses, but are also allergic to them. Severely allergic. (Venn diagram).

One hot, muggy day, I joined some friends at a horse ranch in Indiana for what was supposed to be a beautiful day of picnicking and riding. It was a typical Midwest summer day with severe thunderstorms threatening, and so to be comfortable, I wore shorts. That turned out to be a terrible idea.

[66-Venn Diagram] Upon entering the barn, I immediately started sneezing and coughing, and my eyes started burning. I thought, I'll just tough it out. We were then helped up on the horse's backs with assistance from the owners, and my agony began in earnest. Do you know why you never see cowboys in the movies wearing shorts? It turns out, your leg hair gets ripped out by the saddle as you move. Besides the pain, there were the horse flies to deal with. The more skin you exposed, the bigger buffet they saw. At first, when I could partially control my sneezing, things were fine. The horse settled into a comfortable, slow walk, always keeping three hooves on the ground. But then, either I would sneeze, or swat a fly, or just accidentally squeeze my legs together, and the horse would speed up. The gait changed to a trot, with more bouncing and fewer legs on the ground, and I would go jolting all over the poor horse's back, who would eventually slow down to a walk again.

I was miserable. I'm pretty sure the horse was miserable, too, but he never said anything. I think the flies had a good time, but within our little circle, that was it. And so far, I've been pretty successful at never trying to ride a horse again, or in fact, get near one.

I felt so defeated that day. I was trying to measure up to the other riders, trying to fit in. But I had to deny a very big part of me, which was, I don't ride horses. It just didn't work.

[67-lost woman in crowd] "What in the world am I doing here?" When you are around people who seem to have it all together, you feel small. There are moments in life when we feel like we are in the presence of great people, and we have to live up to their legacy.

In the summer of 2013, I wasn't even a pastor yet, and I was invited to preach at the "Cottagers Service" at Lake Louise Summer Camp. Their preaching schedule included many fine pastors, elders, and orators, and the one guy (me) with the job title, "Director of Student Ministries," which looks as awkward as it is to say. It's like I needed more words in my job description because I was trying to make up for something. Now, I loved being a youth minister, and I love being a pastor. But at the time, I simply felt out of place, because I was the only non-pastor preaching there that summer. It was much the same feeling I had trying to ride a horse, but without the sneezing and the flies.

Have you ever had that feeling? That inadequacy? The pressure to perform? All the eyes watching you? And you think, "What am I even doing here?"

[68-cartoon, 2 prophets] If so, take a look at our scripture again, and you might see yourself in the story of Elisha. Elisha had a strange calling. Elisha was plowing the field one day, when the greatest prophet of the time, Elijah, showed up, threw his cloak over Elisha's shoulders, and said nothing. What did it mean? Elijah was looking for someone to mentor, someone to hand the ministry off to. Elisha hastily prepared to leave, but did he really know what he was getting into? Could Elisha live up to the expectations? I mean, even their names were similar. ELI-JAH. ELI-SHA. Talk about a set up.

[69-Fire from heaven] The miracles of Elijah were pretty impressive. He survived 40 days in the desert, prophesied a drought, saved a widow from starving, then brought her dead son back to life. He called down fire on Mt. Carmel, slaughtered hundreds of false prophets, experienced God in the still small voice, parted the Jordan river, and finally was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. That's what I call a good resumé.

[70-Chariot of fire] So here Elisha stands, the horse-driver, in this crazy moment as he watches the best prophet ever, Elijah, be taken up into heaven by a swirling chariot of fire. Mouth open, bewildered, he looks up at his departing mentor. Elisha cries, "My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" (2 Kings 2:12)

Was he thinking, "Elijah, you're worth more than them!" Or perhaps, "Elijah, how will I lead those people without you?" Or was he just freaked out by the fire, and maybe, was allergic to horses, like me?

The song, "The Chariots of Fire," is based on this story. It's a great, motivating refrain, a good movie soundtrack. But the song is also a kind of funeral dirge, from Elisha's perspective at least. Although his mentor, Elijah, never died, those chariots took him away. He was gone from this earth. And while it's a great miracle, it was a great challenge to Elisha, for he was left alone.

[71-more prophets] In our scripture reading, you will note those prophets were telling Elisha all day, "Your master is leaving you." "I know, so be quiet," he keeps saying. (2 Kings 2:3&4) I remember times of grief in my own life when I also did not want to talk. My friend and mentor, Rick Sheppard, a pastor, friend and dean at Lake Louise, died suddenly in 2001. When I was attending Northwestern, our Director of Bands, John Paynter. There are so many others I can still see clearly in my mind: my grandparents, my piano teacher, Katja's mom. Friends and coworkers have come and gone through my life, not always dying, but sometimes just moving away. When you lose someone, especially a mentor, you feel like you're left holding the reigns, wondering, "How the heck do I get this horse moving, when I feel so ill equipped?" Have you ever been in that place?

[72-prison]]John the Baptist, surprising, also struggled with insecurity and depression. He landed in prison about the time when Jesus starting preaching. John was separated from the disciples, even doubting his own ministry of repentance, baptism, and preparation for the Messiah. John started playing the "What if?" game. What if you had failed to recognize the Messiah?

So, John sent a message to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3) Let me paraphrase: "Lord, I'm doubting myself in my circumstances, and I'm feeling very alone here. Can you help me?"

Jesus gave John an answer, and maybe it wasn't what John wanted to hear, but it was what he needed to hear. "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." (Matthew 11:4-6) In other words: "Look, John, I'm not going to make everything perfect for you. But look around you. The work of God is being done, sometimes even in spite of ourselves. Yes, you're in a bad place. Rescue is not coming, not in this life. But take heart, for God's will is being done."

[73-verses] In my times of grief and struggle, two scriptures come immediately to mind. One is Philippians 4:13 – "I can do all things through [Christ] who gives me strength." The other is 2nd Corinthians 12:9 – "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Sure, God could take the reins from us and do it all for us, but that's not usually the way God works. And also, it might actually be better for us in the long run to discover who we really are, weaknesses and all.

[74-Elisha parts the water] Let's go back to Elisha for a moment. Imagine the feeling of Elijah's mantle on his shoulders. He wonders, "Am I strong enough? Is the God of Elijah with me now?" Elisha tests the waters, literally, by striking the river with the mantle, and God gives him a sign. The waters of the Jordan River part for him to cross, the same way they did for Elijah. (2 Kings 2:14)

Do you know that God asks you not to be strong, but to be faithful? Maybe your sign is not as dramatic as rivers parting. Maybe it is just a still small voice. But, friends, we have to seek it. We can't stand, staring up in the clouds, like the disciples after Jesus left, wondering what to do next. We have to move in faith. We have to expect, yes, we are going to make mistakes. But our mentors were not perfect, either. And we can take solace in that fact, that we are not expected to be perfect, just faithful.

Elisha was a great prophet in his own right. After Elijah left, Elisha healed polluted water, called out a bear to defend himself, saved the Israelite army from dying of thirst, then defeated the Moab enemy army, made a widow's oil jar never run out, brought a woman's son back to life, healed a poisoned pot of food, fed 100 people with 20 loaves of bread, healed a man of leprosy, cursed his

servant with leprosy, made an ax head float, blinded and trapped another enemy army, and ended a famine. By my count, the Bible lists about twice as many miracles of Elisha than of Elijah.

Elisha learned to be himself. He came out from under Elijah's shadow, and it was good. You and I can emerge as well. We can learn to be ourselves.

[75]-title] I'm glad I took a chance on that horse. Besides giving me a sermon illustration, it taught me something about myself. I did something downright terrible, and I survived. I learned more about who I am.

So, who are you? Do you feel like Elisha, trying to measure up to those around you? Who are your mentors, the ones who have gone before you, encouraged you, and helped you be yourself?

Or do you feel like John? Your friends have left you, you're stuck somewhere you don't want to be, and you start to doubt everything you've worked for in life?

If either of those ring true for you, lift up your gaze. There is hope. God has not forgotten you, nor abandoned you. God sees your grief, carries your burden, and wants to replace that insecurity with the confidence found in trusting in Jesus.

On the other hand, maybe you feel like Elijah. Has God placed people in your life, to mentor and encourage, and to hand over the reins of the ministry? We all need those people in our lives. They are the ones who help us discover our own unique gifts for ministry. And if you find one, tell them, "Thanks."

No matter who you are, we all have one great mentor in common, Jesus. He is the ultimate encourager. He set the example for us, saved us, and right now offers us a chance to truly be ourselves, the way we were created. He is our rock, our fortress in hard times, the one we can count on when all others leave us. You can trust in him, and when you do, it won't matter whether you are Elijah or Elisha, John or Johanna, pastor or youth guy. God will use you and your unique gifts in ministry right where you are. Take a step out in faith and you will see.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: 2nd Corinthians 12:9

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Reflection Questions:

1. Recall someone who mentored you. How did they help you?
2. Recall a time when you felt overshadowed and insignificant. Why did you feel that way?
3. What legacies have you been asked to fill? Do you feel prepared for them?
4. How does Jesus equip us with a spirit of power and love instead of fear?
(See 2 Timothy 1:7)
5. Who is following your footsteps and needs your encouragement today?