I would like to share something with you, a fable. It begins like many fables:

Once upon a time

Once upon a time the trees decided to choose a king.  
    First they said to the olive tree,  
    ‘Be our king!’  
**9**But the olive tree refused, saying,  
‘Should I quit producing the olive oil  
    that blesses both God and people,  
    just to wave back and forth over the trees?’

**10**“Then they said to the fig tree,  
    ‘You be our king!’

**11**But the fig tree also refused, saying,  
‘Should I quit producing my sweet fruit  
    just to wave back and forth over the trees?’

**12**“Then they said to the grapevine,  
    ‘You be our king!’  
**13**But the grapevine also refused, saying,  
‘Should I quit producing the wine  
    that cheers both God and people,  
    just to wave back and forth over the trees?’

**14**“Then all the trees finally turned to the thornbush and said,  
    ‘Come, you be our king!’

**15**And the thornbush replied to the trees,  
‘If you truly want to make me your king,  
    come and take shelter in my shade.  
If not, let fire come out from me  
    and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’”

Once upon a time is not how we expect a Bible story to begin. But this is a Bible story, in the Book of Judges, chapter 9. It is a cautionary tale of what can happen when you pick a leader.

One of the things we are looking at today is how are we to understand the Bible? How do we interpret them? Let us pray.

Brian McLaren tells the story of a little girl who, upon hearing the story of Elijah being taken up in the fiery chariot, asked her mother if the story was “real or pretend.” The little girl’s mother responded: “That’s a great question! Some stories are real, some are pretend, and some of the best ones use a mix of both reality and make believe to tell us something important. What do you think of the Elijah story?”

This very wise mother, instead of telling her daughter **what** to think, invited her daughter **to** think, to join the interpretive community.

That’s who we are—we are the interpretive community. We are the ones who are called to make sense of the stories. That’s quite a responsibility.

After all, people have interpreted the Bible to support wonderful things, but also to do terrible things.

So how we interpret the stories, can determine how they shape us and shape our behavior. People have been inspired by the stories of the Bible to start hospitals and universities, to take in and raise orphans and build houses for strangers. But they have also been inspired by the Bible to form the inquisition, hold witch hunts, and justify slavery. How we interpret the stories of the Bible matters. It matters a great deal.

We say that God speaks to us through the Bible, that it's God's Word. As United Methodists we recognize that this authority derives from three sources:

* We hold that the writers of the Bible were inspired, that they were filled with God's Spirit as they wrote the truth to the best of their knowledge.
* We hold that God was at work in the process of canonization, the process of picking which writings would be in the Bible and which would not, during which only the most faithful and useful books were adopted as Scripture.
* We hold that the Holy Spirit works today in our thoughtful study of the Scriptures, especially as we study them together, seeking to relate the old words to life's present realities.

The Bible's authority is, therefore, nothing magical. For example, we do not open the text at random to discover God's will, like some sort of divining rod. The authority of Scripture derives from the movement of God's Spirit in times past and in our reading of it today.

Perhaps the Bible is best put to use when we seriously answer these questions about a given text: (1) What did this passage mean to its original hearers? (2) What part does it play in the Bible's total witness? (3) What does God seem to be saying to my life, my community, my world, through this passage? Brian McLaren words it a little differently. He says, “good interpretation begins with three elements: science, art, and heart.”

Science looks at the historical context and what research can tell us about how the original audience would have understood the text, the situation that was happening when it was written and that it was written about. To divorce scripture from its context is to rob it of meaning and often leads to misreading it.

Second, since the Bible is a literary work—actually many literary works, we need to look at it like art. Hear the song behind the Psalms, the poems in the poetry, and storytelling in the histories.

But in all our work, we listen with a humble heart for the guiding voice of the Spirit.

So what can we learn from these stories, from today’s scripture readings, the story of Elijah’s departure and the story of Jesus’ departure, and for that matter from the fable I read? There is a theme in all these stories—they are all about transition of leadership.

The story of Elijah is about how when a leader leaves, he often leaves in a blaze of glory—and the fireworks, the legacy, becomes a distraction and people being to follow the reputation instead of the example of the leader. Elijah puts Elisha through a series of tests and trials but most of all, Elijah says you have to keep a keen eye on me, on the center, on the core, not the fireworks, you have to watch to the end, without getting distracted by the fireworks and the flaming chariot. Then and only then will you be worthy to take up the mantle. Only if you stay focused on the actual work, on the actual leader, will you be ready to take over and lead yourself.

And Elisha does.

We see something similar with Jesus’ transition—except the disciples are left just staring up into the clouds. It takes an angel to come and say, why are you staring up into the sky—there’s work to be done, get to it. Were they going to be people with their focus, and their heads, in the clouds? Or will they indeed be Jesus’ witnesses to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and all the world?

Was Elijah really taken up in a fiery chariot? Was Jesus really swept up in the clouds?

Some will say yes, the stories are literally true. Some will insist on it and even go so far as to say if it isn’t literally true than faith isn’t real.

But some will say, can’t be. It violates the laws of physics. Heaven isn’t above the clouds—after all the astronauts have been above the clouds. No fiery chariots, not floating Jesus awaits us there in a physical realm.

Does it matter? Isn’t what matters the truth behind the story? And what we learn from it and how it changes us?

So what can we learn here in these stories of leadership transition?

When we seek to understand biblical stories, we begin with science, specifically historical context. The fable I started with comes from a time when the tribes of Israel were led by judges—not judges as we understand the term. But rather what we might describe as warlord or tribal leader. These were violent times and the people longed for a leader, a strong leader that would bring some order and peace—other countries had kings, maybe that is what they needed too, said the Israelites. The fable was intended to say, be careful what you ask for—a king is not always the greatest person or the one you would pick. It might be the only person willing to take the job, because he wasn’t doing anything else, or anything more important.

And the king might be destruction rather than salvation. When they finally get a king, King Saul, he will turn out to be a disappointment. He will fall short of the ideal. In his wake will come David. And his rule will be successful. In fact, his rule was so successful that it was the standard against which every other king would be judged. Over the centuries, the various kings of Israel, and eventually the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah, almost all caused trouble and disappointment. They were almost all corrupt and interested in their own interests to the detriment of their people. Time and time again, scripture will tell us, “they did evil in the sight of the Lord.”

As a result, David would be idealized. Following his example would be lost in the ideal of following his reputation. The people would begin to dream of a second David, who would come and rule as a military king in the model of David.

When Jesus came, the people thought Jesus would be this new idealized David. That’s what Palm Sunday represented. The people celebrating the return of a Davidic king. Only to have their hopes dashed when Jesus made it clear that he lived by a different interpretation of the old stories. When Jesus healed someone he didn’t say, “I made you well.” or “My faith saved you.” He said, “your faith has made you well.”

He freed them from a world with a king who used conquest and violence to reign, to one who used peaceful, faithful action, and freed them to be part of the peaceful, faithful action.

This is an interesting week, for the country, for our sermon series, and indeed for our church as we participate in the transition of power for our country. There have been lots of fireworks to distract us. Lots of concerns raised about what it means to have a transition of leadership. What does our understanding of the biblical story tell us about what we should do in these times of transition?

We follow a Lord who never stood with those in power.

He ate with sinners, and healed the sick, and freed the oppressed. He taught women, and welcomed children. Among his followers were shepherd, and tax collectors, and Samaritans, and fallen women, and sinful men, and gentiles, and the unclean, and the unholy, and the unwelcome, and the disenfranchised. And he welcomed them all. He taught that you could not serve both God and money. You had to pick one.

As his followers we are called to follow him and to be his witnesses. Not to get distracted by the fireworks or to have our head I the clouds. But to look out for the unclean, the unholy, the unwelcome and the disenfranchised, and to welcome them as God welcomes them. To protect them, as God would protect them. Because, Jesus said, as you do to the lease of these, so you do to me.

We have seen deep divisions in our communities, divisions, I believe that as a church we are called to bridge and to mend and to heal. Brian McLaren puts it this way: “How will we grapple with complex forces that break down family and community cohesion and leave vulnerable people at great risk—especially women, and especially the very young and the very old? How will we face our personal demons—of greed, lust, anxiety, depression, anger, and addition—especially when people are spending billions to stimulate those demons so we will buy their products?

“These aren’t pretend problems. To find real-word solutions, we need to be wise interpreters of our past. Like Elijah’s apprentice, Elisha, we must stay focused on the substance at the center, undistracted by all the surrounding firewords. Because the meaning we shape from the stores we interpret will, in turn, shape us.” (McLaren, *The Road We Make By Walking*, 54)

I have been asked, what now? What do I do now?

I think the answer is surprisingly simple, and terribly complex: Work for the kingdom of God.

Work for justice.

I know that many who voted for Donald Trump did so from deep conviction and concern, not from hatred or prejudice. And yet, those who are filled with hatred and prejudice seem to feel entitled and empowered. I personally know people who have been attacked, and told that the country is now headed in the right direction and their kind can get out.

So as Christians, as followers of one who spoke of the least of these, we are called to work to end oppression by defending those who are oppressed. If you see someone being attacked, do not hide or be silent.

Hatred is never ok. Violence is not ok. We as Christians are called to stand against it, and with the vulnerable.

**Prayer for after the election:**

God of all people and all nations:

Today mourning and celebration commingle.  
Jubilation and heartache are juxtaposed  
In neighborhoods where lawns proclaimed  
Support for different candidates, on Facebook walls  
And Twitter streams where clashing viewpoints meet.

Grant us awareness of each others’ hopes and fears  
Even across the great divides of red and blue,  
Urban and rural. Open us to each others’ needs.

Help us to listen and to hear with our hearts and your Spirit.  
Purify our hearts so that those who rejoice do not gloat  
And those who grieve do not despair.

Strengthen our ability to be kind to one another  
And to ourselves. Awaken in us the yearning  
To build a more perfect union. Let us roll up our sleeves  
Whether today we feel exultation or sorrow, and together  
Shape a nation of welcome and compassion.

Let ours be a land where no one need fear abuse  
Or retribution, where every diversity is celebrated,  
Where those who are most vulnerable are protected.  
May bigotry and violence vanish like smoke.  
May compassion prevail from sea to shining sea.

Inspire the minds of all women and men to whom you have committed the responsibility of government and leadership.

May they indeed be truly successful leaders, bringing prosperity, peace, and justice, as YOU, define those terms, that your will would be done,

Give to them the vision of truth and justice, that by their counsel all nations and peoples may work together.

Give to the people of our country zeal for justice and strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will.

Forgive our shortcomings as a nation; purify our hearts to see and love the truth.

We pray all these things through Jesus Christ. Amen.