This is a really exciting time of year, with all the graduations and new beginnings that so many people are experiencing. I believe graduation for East Hampton High School was two days ago, on Friday, is that right?? … I saw an interesting quote about graduation once, by Robert Orben. He said, “A graduation ceremony is an event where all the students have to dress identically in caps and gowns and march in a straight line, and then the commencement speaker tells them that ‘individuality’ is the key to success.” I guess it’s never too early to start confusing young adults with mixed messages. +++ This past Monday, we had a very nice Baccalaureate service at the Amagansett Church. Clericus was well represented. Musicians from East Hampton High School:: the Strings Chamber Ensemble and the Camerata Choral Ensemble – were wonderful, as always… Afterwards, we gathered in Scoville Hall to chat with students over refreshments ((which consisted of Chips Ahoy and water bottles – we’ll have to work on that for next year…)). As we talked, I recognized the conversations and the expressions on the faces of the graduates. I’ve heard it – and seen it – before. +++ A sense of urgency… Something big is afoot – an important change is happening – and you’ve just got to be ready for it. People ask the usual questions:: “What’s next for you?” “Where are you going to college?” “What will you be majoring in?” “What do you want to BE when you finish growing up??” +++ I still remember that feeling – not just from high school, but from every time I’ve graduated – finished a degree – and it’s time to move on:: “I haven’t settled on a college yet – and it starts in just a couple of months!” “Is it a mistake to go all the way to NJ and change fields for grad school?” “Am I really headed where I need to be?” “What if I no churches call me – then what?” +++ Urgency mixed with a bit of paranoia – and nausea. +++ I think that pretty well describes what it feels like to be a new graduate… Yes, eventually things will settle down – it’s a long game, after all. But it feels like a short game on graduation day.:: Who AM I – who am I GOING to be – and how do I get from here to there? +++ Big changes are coming… “Am I Ready?”

Those are feelings that are well understood by Elisha and the disciples of Jesus in today’s scripture readings. Something big is coming – something new is going to be asked of me – am I up to the challenge? +++ The gospel lesson opens with an ominous statement that’s it’s easy to overlook: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” What do you think that means? It’s an important moment of transition in Luke, at the end of a very busy chapter. Right here in chapter 9, among other things, Jesus feeds the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. +++ Peter famously declares that Jesus is “The Messiah of God” when Jesus asks who they think he is. +++ Then, high on a mountain, Christ is Transfigured, and appears to the disciples speaking to Moses and Elijah. +++ And he twice tells them about his coming death and resurrection. ++++++ Now, in verse 51, we read, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” As far as Jesus is concerned… from this moment on… he’s on his way to his crucifixion. We’ve reached the very beginning of the End Game. ++++++ Now, I don’t think the disciples know exactly what has changed – but they start showing this graduation-day urgency. “Big changes are coming… Am I ready?” ++++++ A funny thing about Jesus’ disciples is they often find a way to both overreact and underreact to something at the same time. So now, when the village of Samaritans refuses to receive Jesus, James and John jump right to an extreme reaction:: commanding fire to come down from heaven and consume the village!! And they aren’t asking Jesus to do it – they are offering to do it themselves: “Lord, do you want US to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” +++ Now that things are getting REAL, they want to look strong… ready to take over if necessary. But Jesus quickly shuts them down – “he turns and rebukes them.” +++ And they keep moving – on to the next town. Urgency. Jesus is picking up the pace. If you’re going to follow Jesus now, on the way to his appointment with a cross in Jerusalem – there’s no time to bury the dead – no time to say goodbye. +++ “I will follow you wherever you go,” they say. “I will follow you whereever you go.” ++++++ But it’s not so easy to follow the Son of Man, who has nowhere to lay his head. They will follow him to Jerusalem – but where he goes from there they cannot follow. ++++++ Urgency… But this passage is really about the long game. It feels like a short game – it feels immediate and urgent – that’s why they suggest burning the village… But Jesus is preparing them for what will happen after he is gone. He is preparing them for the commitment and
focus it will take to continue his work – to **PICK UP THE MANTLE** – to carry the Good News to the world – and to build a church.

“**Picking up the mantle**”… in ancient times, the mantle – or hooded cloak – was often considered a reflection of authority. When you **pass** the mantle – or **pick up** the mantle – a transition of power is taking place. To “pick up the mantle” is to accept responsibility. And we still use the phrase today. +++ Well, “picking up the mantle”:: that’s **definitely** something that echoes our Old Testament lesson. **Elijah**’s mantle… it has been a symbol of his connection to God and his authority as a prophet throughout his narrative. You might remember in last week’s message, when Elijah was alone on Mount Horeb looking for the presence of God – and he found it in the sound of sheer silence. “He wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.” +++ When he sees Elisha, his protégé and the next great prophet after him…, when he sees Elisha for the first time, plowing a field behind a yoke of oxen, **Elijah throws his mantle over him**… and Elisha follows him. +++ Now – in today’s reading **Elisha knows** that something big is about to happen. It opens much like the gospel reading, “Now **when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind**, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.” On the road – telling truth to power – and truth to the people – when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way. “Now Elisha knows in today’s reading plowing a field behind a yoke of oxen, **Elijah throws his mantle over him**… and Elisha follows him. +++ Now – in today’s reading **Elisha knows** that something big is about to happen. It opens much like the gospel reading, “Now **when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind**, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.” On the road – telling truth to power – and truth to the people – **just like Jesus**. Then, when it is time for him to ascend to heaven, Elijah **takes his mantle**, rolls it up, and strikes the water of the Jordan River with it… And what happens? For the **third time** in the Bible – God parts the waters to allow crossing on dry ground. Generations ago, the Lord had parted the waters of the Red Sea through Moses and his staff, to save Israel from the Egyptians and **begin** their 40-years in the Wilderness. Then, at the other end of those 40 years, Joshua had parted the Jordan for Israel to enter the Promised Land. Now, Elijah, with his **mantle**, does so once again. And unlike Jesus’ disciples who scattered in fear after his arrest, Elisha stays with **his** mentor and friend – watches the chariot and horses of fire as it comes between them – **watches** Elijah ascend to heaven in the whirlwind – until he can no longer see him. +++ Then, as the scene clears, …and the smoke and fire dissipate,…. Elisha sees Elijah’s mantle… – laying on the ground where it fell – and **he picks it up**. When he returns to the Jordan, it is now his turn – **his time** – to strike that water with the mantle – and once more the water parts – and Elisha crosses over on dry land. The power of God is with him – **because he accepted the call** – he followed his master – and when the time came, he picked up the mantle and carried it himself. +++ And that is how the church has survived the many generations – many centuries – since these biblical events:: when the mantle falls – people of faith pick it up, they carry it, they wield it, they part waters to provide dry land, and they draw people to the Lord.

That’s what Elisha, and, eventually, Jesus’ disciples do. They **pick up the mantle from their master**. They continue the work. And it was not easy. It was daunting. It was scary. Elisha didn’t think he was up to it – he said he’d need a **double-share** of the Spirit to be able to follow in Elijah’s footsteps… **And so he got it**. +++ And the Holy Spirit also rushed in to empower the Apostles on Pentecost. +++ **The GOOD NEWS** is, when we **respond** to God’s call,… when we **stand up** and do something in the name of Christ **when big things are brewing**,…. we **also** are given the courage and wisdom to succeed:: a double dose of the Spirit. +++ **And my siblings in Christ** – **big things are brewing**, +++ **The Church** – both capital C Church, and each individual church like ours – are facing a real time of trial. Demographics are not in our favor – more and more young people feel alienated by the Church and step away – unlikely to return. **All** churches seem to be painted with the colors of judgment and exclusion, though only a vocal minority of Christians express those beliefs. +++ As memberships decline and congregations are less engaged, it becomes harder and harder to provide meaningful programs and ministries for children, youth, young adults, **and** seniors. Long-term leaders who carried churches on their backs for a generation are retiring, are becoming less numerous, and less agile. As a result, the very notion of what it means to “BE” church is getting thinner …– less connected… – less abundant… +++ **The Church has reached a crucial moment** – **an existential crisis**. We have no further to look that in our own community – at the disorienting downward spiral of some churches here… +++ +++ **And there**, but by the grace of God, go we. +++ +++ **Our faces are turned toward Jerusalem.** We’ve crossed the Jordan and the fiery chariots are gathering. We’ve reached the beginning of the End Game. +++ Now what? Do you see the mantle on the ground – where your mentors, teachers, parents, and pastors have left it? Will you pick it up? +++ +++ **We need you to pick it up**. We’re playing the long game – it’s not about what we’ll do this month, or this summer. It’s about how we can influence the entire lives of our children for Jesus – it’s about how we can BE church (and everything that means)
for our young adults – it’s about finding new ways for you to enjoy fellowship with this wonderful church family – it’s about continuously teaching and learning about Christ and our Holy Scriptures through adulthood – and it’s about ways to make sure the community knows who we really are – and how much we love them. We are playing the long game for Christ. +++ +++ +++ So come,… pick up the mantle, … find your passion in the church… create something new, or help lead something that’s already here – make it yours in the name of Christ. If you aren’t on a committee – join one – maybe Christian Education, or Fellowship, or Communications… Let us benefit from your creativity – your ideas – your leadership. +++ It’s not easy being an active member of a church, is it, when there are so many other priorities pressing on you from every side? +++ But when you pick up the mantle, you will find that the waters will part to clear your way – and a double share of the Spirit will rest upon you – to give you strength – and help us find our next future in the Lord – beyond Jerusalem.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.