

Our Scripture today has inspired some of the great spirituals that are beloved by people of all races. Most all of us know: “Swing Low Sweet Chariot/ Coming for to carry me home/ Swing Low Sweet Chariot/ Coming for to carry me home.” You have to love the verse that says: “If you get there before I do/ Tell all my friends I’m a coming too.”

One of the interesting things about the songs and art that this particular passage has inspired is that they often get it wrong. Notice that verse 11 says, “*As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.*” So, it was not the *chariot of fire* and that took Elijah to heaven, technically. It was *the whirlwind*.

Today I want to make four points about this story as we look carefully at the narrative in 1 Kings 2. This is a dramatic tale told with classic story-telling technique. There is a three-fold repetition, and it includes a climactic scene with the chariots and the horsemen of Israel—as well as a whirlwind.

First, it’s not IF but WHEN. I want all of us to notice something quite interesting about this passage. The narrator begins the story by giving away the secret of what is going to happen. Usually, the storyteller will save the climactic part until the very end and keep the listener in suspense. But our story begins with these words, “*When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind...*” Then, as the tale unfolds, everywhere Elijah goes, there are people who already know what is going to happen. First, he goes to Bethel where he finds a company of prophets. These prophets take Elisha aside and say to him, “*Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?*” They already know that this is the day. In the second scene, they go to Jericho and the same thing happens. The prophets take Elisha aside and say, “*Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?*” Each time, Elisha responds by saying, “*Yes, I know, so be quiet*” (that is, hold your peace).

Everybody knows *what* is going to happen, but they don't know exactly *when* it will happen. The question was not IF the Lord was going to take Elijah, it was WHEN. As I thought about this, I realized there are certain things in life where the question is not IF but WHEN. If we have genuine faith in God, we do not have to wonder about the IF, only the WHEN. It is not IF God loves us and will be good to us, it is WHEN God will show his goodness to us. It is not IF God will shower his grace upon us, but WHEN it will happen. The Bible strongly affirms the return of Jesus Christ. Just as he departed, he will come again. It's not a question of IF he will come again, it's a question of WHEN he will come again. The Bible makes it clear that we will all die. It's not a question of IF we will die, but only WHEN we will die. It's not a question of IF we will receive eternal life, it's only a question of WHEN. Faith gives us a confidence about certain things happening. We simply don't know WHEN they will happen. That was the case in this story as well.

Second, we find an emphasis on being there, being at the right place at the right time. Elisha has to be there at the right time in order to receive the blessing. Notice in verse 9 that Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. "*You have asked a difficult thing,*" Elijah said, "*yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.*" This idea was foreshadowed earlier on three separate occasions. When they were in Gilgal, Elijah says to Elisha, "*Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel*" (2:2). But Elisha responds, "*As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you*" (2:2). When they get to Bethel, Elijah explains that he must now go to Jericho. Again he encourages Elisha to stay behind, but Elisha makes the same promise that he will not leave his master. He is testing Elisha. Elisha is saying in no uncertain terms, "I'm not leaving you!"

It was very important for Elisha to be at the right place. We need to be at the right place. That's why it is important to be in church. It is important to be here when God pours out his Spirit on his people; when we are sent to attempt a mission to which God is calling us. We cheat ourselves when we are not here.

There's a little story about a pastor who had a member of the church who had been a regular attender, but for some reason had quit coming. The pastor went to visit him one chilly night. He knocked on the door and the man greeted the pastor and invited him to sit by the fire. The man knew why the pastor was there, so he decided to just wait and see what the pastor had to say. But he didn't say anything either. It seemed they were both trying to wait out the other. Eventually the pastor took the tongs from the fireplace, reached into the fire and picked up a burning coal. He put the burning ember on the hearth and watched. Soon it began to cool and the flame flickered out. After a while, when it was cold, the pastor took the tongs again, picked up that same piece and put it back in the fire. Before long, the heat had returned the coal to a blazing ember again. The pastor put the tongs down and said, "Well, I guess I'll go now." When he got to the door, the man said to the pastor, "Thanks for stopping by. The fire has not gone out yet. I'll see you in church next Sunday."

Third, this is a story about the passing of authority from one prophet to another. Elijah was a mighty prophet performing miracles while Elisha was the apprentice. Here we see the prophetic transition from Elijah to Elisha. In verse 9, Elisha asks for a double portion of his spirit, which means that he wanted to be designated the one to be successor and inheritor of the spiritual gifts that Elijah had. Verse 13 says, "*Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him...*" his mantle. In the end, Elisha winds up doing even more miracles than Elijah did. But the Bible doesn't forget Elijah. He becomes a Messianic figure or, more accurately, a forerunner of the Messiah.

Today, it is important for the church today to cultivate such transitions as well. We need to focus on the calling of pastors in our churches, to be trained and equipped to take the place of older pastors. That's one reason why we have had 16 student assistants from the seminary in the past 28 years. Generally speaking, there are not enough pastors to go around, even though we have a shrinking number of churches. It's getting harder to find qualified pastors. My point is that the church needs to intentionally focus on passing the mantle from

one generation of leaders to another. We need to continue to encourage young adults to listen for the call of God to serve in full-time Christian ministry.

My fourth point is how Elisha responds to all of this. The chariots and horses separate Elijah from Elisha. The whirlwind takes Elijah up into heaven and Elisha has no idea what to say. He mutters, *“My father! My father!”* Elisha was basically asking to be Elijah’s legitimate son, heir to the mantle of prophecy: “Let me be your beloved son, so that people will listen to me when I speak the word of God.” Therefore, after the whirlwind, Elisha stands alone, holding Elijah’s mantle, pausing on the bank of the Jordan. *“Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?”* he cries. The water parts and Elisha crosses over. God acts with power. The words of Psalm 77:19 describe what Elisha experienced: *“Your way is through the sea, your path through the mighty waters.”*

Sometimes we too find ourselves in places where we are numbed by the presence of God. We look for a way through the sea. It may not be as dramatic as this story, but there are other ways God makes his presence known to us. Frederick Buechner once described just such an experience. He was in his apple orchard, praying and meditating and, all of a sudden, he felt God’s presence in an extraordinary way. He fully expected something like chariots of fire or that the heavens would roll back, and he would see God. He was listening and looking intently. Then, the wind stirred a little and two branches hit against one another with a “click, click.” And that was it. He had a vivid impression of God’s presence and power. But he was kind of numb.

For us it may be something as dramatic as chariots of fire or it may be as simple as the “click, click” of two tree limbs. But if we follow Elisha’s example, we can experience it too. If we have faith enough to say, “It’s not IF but WHEN God will come to us,” and we are determined enough to be in the right place at the right time, then we too may receive the mantle of God’s Spirit and find ourselves in the presence of God. Amen.

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