

“Chariot of Fire”

1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-14

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This morning, we bring our sermon series on Elijah to literally a “fiery conclusion” as after conferring the mantle of his prophetic authority upon his disciple Elisha, a chariot of fire descends, sweeps him up, and then carries him off to heaven. Elijah is like a character out of a 1960’s spaghetti western: this stranger from the desert arrives in town to courageously take on and bring down the wicked house of King Ahab and his cunning wife Jezebel before leaving just as mysteriously as when he arrived. Over the past three months, we saw how he spent a year beside the Brook Cherith where God would preserve him throughout Israel’s greatest drought. Though he was kept alive by a trickle of brackish water and fed by ravens who provided him with scraps of rotten waste and bits of flesh taken from the carcasses of dead animals, he survived while so many others perished. More importantly, he learned that if he could withstand the loneliness, the revulsion, the humiliation of that year, he could endure almost anything. God never promises us a comfortable and secure existence- only that he would walk with us and supply our needs in the process. And yet, that is ALL we need in order to not just LIVE, but to THRIVE and eventually become the kind of person God DESIRES us to become.

Next, we followed Elijah as he left that spot and proceeded to Sidon in Phoenicia, the home of Jezebel, his greatest enemy, to now take care of SOMEONE ELSE- a despairing widow and her son who were preparing to take their last meal together and then die. Elijah has often been called the “loneliest man in the Old Testament” because he never has the support of a wife, a family, friends, or even associates (except, of course, Elisha whom he meets at the end). Here, God directs him to someone he can now care for OTHER THAN HIMSELF while SHE has someone with whom she could share her OWN sufferings with; they could help bear EACH OTHER’S burdens while offering one another the most important gifts in the world- the gift of love, the gift of hope, and the gift of friendship. The fact is that we are ALL born to live in relationship with other persons, and that is why Christianity remains so unique among the world’s religions- it involves a personal relationship with the living God, with the very One who created us and CONTINUES to sustain us EVEN AFTER DEATH.

We saw that after three years in Sidon, Elijah is now confident enough to confront Ahab head on. He challenges his prophets--all four hundred and fifty of them--and their god to a contest to see which is stronger, and you could guess who won. More than an indictment of Ahab’s false and empty religion, it was an indictment of all the IDOLATRY that so dominated his world and life in general. Simply put, idols are “imposters of God”; they can be any thing, idea, person, or institution we may place ultimate trust in for our security. It originates in the human decision to seek life and salvation apart from the TRUE source of life which is in God. That battle that took place many years ago atop Mt. Carmel is thus a contest that continues to take place EVERY DAY in our OWN lives as well.

But Elijah’s GREATEST success on that mountain also presents him with his GREATEST CRISIS. At the news of the defeat of her own prophets, Jezebel places a bounty on his head which results in the prophet fleeing for his life. Retreating to a distant cave, he is confident that no one will ever discover him there. However, God has no problem in finding him

and revealing to him the utter faithlessness of his actions. Here we see that Elijah's doubts and fears have NOT disqualified him from serving as one of God's prophets, that if ANYTHING, his vulnerability and lack of trust have only DEEPENED his dependency upon God. Instead of REJECTING him, God now gives him a NEW commission. He is to leave Horeb and travel to Damascus to anoint Hazael as King of Syria; then to anoint Jehu as King of Israel, and finally to nominate Elisha as his own successor. Thus Elijah is pulled out of his fears and doubts and self-pity which has paralyzed his will and forced BACK INTO THE WORLD where God's work is still waiting to be done.

Our final encounter with Elijah took place last week and it involved Ahab's deception and murder of Naboth in order to steal his much-coveted vineyard. What we learned is that Jehovah is a god who is AS VITALLY AND EQUALLY CONCERNED WITH SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE as he is for our PHYSICAL and SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING. To treat with contempt another person's life as Ahab and Jezebel did with Naboth's was to demonstrate complete contempt towards GOD, as well. For their punishment, Elijah foretold that the two of them would subsequently die horrible deaths. The truth is that our God has a special love for the poor and hungry and oppressed in the world due to their social situation and he no less feels the injustice of every system and every policy that continues to foster such sin.

We now come to our first reading for this morning concerning the call of Elisha. He didn't actually "anoint" Elisha as he "cast his mantle upon him." In ancient days, a mantle was an outer cloak used for additional covering and warmth, especially at night. Eventually, it meant more than just a cloak to protect someone from the cold and the elements but came to represent a spiritual covering also. Thus, mantles usually refer to one's spiritual authority and anointing. By placing his mantle around Elisha's shoulders, Elijah was letting his young disciple know that the torch was about to be passed and that HIS mission would soon become ELISHA'S mission as well.

Our second reading involves Elijah's farewell. When he informs Elisha that the day had finally come to conclude his ministry and for God to take him out of the world, Elisha insists three times that he will not leave him, that wherever Elijah goes, HE would go as well. How reminiscent this is of Ruth and her pledge to her mother-in-law Naomi when she told her, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you."

In a departure ceremony that included Elijah striking the Jordan with his mantle thereby causing the waters to part--an act that recalled the Exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Sea of Reeds—Elijah asks Elisha if there is anything MORE he can do for him before he leaves. Elisha requests that he receive a double-portion of Elijah's spirit. In ancient times, the rightful heir could often demand a double portion of his inheritance which is what Elisha does here. The prophet tells him that if Elisha can see him as he is being taken from this world, then his wish will be granted. A whirlwind suddenly appears and from out of its midst is a chariot with horses of fire symbolizing the presence and power of God. As Elijah is ferried from earth to his new home in heaven, Elisha cries out, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" indicating that he DOES see him as he is being transported away. He will be granted

his wish AFTER ALL. With his departure, Elisha takes up Elijah's mantle and begins his NEW role as God's personal spokesman to the people of Israel.

When I look at Elijah's life and ministry from the beginning to the end, I can find at least THREE IMPORTANT LESSONS. The FIRST is how--as God's prophet—he had to discover for himself how LIFE WITH GOD IS ONE CONTINUOUS ADVENTURE; it is a TREMENDOUS JOURNEY filled with all manner of twists and turns and unexpected detours. Like Pilgrim in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, we find ourselves on a great odyssey that has a very DEFINITE beginning but a very INDETERMINATE end. We all know where we've come from but few of us know where we are and certainly nobody knows where or when or how it will all finish. EVEN TODAY, our lives are filled with many more QUESTIONS than answers: For younger people, it might be "What am I going to do with my life?" or "Will I settle down, marry, and raise a family?" For middle-aged persons, it may be, "Do I want to spend the rest of my life doing something I find so unfulfilling?" or "Will there be enough for me to retire on when the time comes?" For people in the latter stages of life, it's often, "Have I done anything significant with my life?" or "Who will be there with me when the end finally comes?" We don't know the answers to such questions now, nor should we be concerned about them- we'll find the answers in due time. And, certainly, it hasn't been easy learning to walk by faith- the way is often fraught with all sorts of risks and insecurities. Yet if we continue the journey with faith and love and hope brimming in our hearts, if we see our lives as drawn up and directed by Christ himself, God will take care of the rest- he PROMISES us that! He will see to it that we arrive at our destination SAFELY.

SECONDLY, as we ALSO saw with Elijah, THE GOAL OF THIS JOURNEY we find ourselves on is that WE TOO would evidence real growth and development in OUR lives. The prophet was a much different person at the end of his life than he was at the beginning. He could never have defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel had he not experienced God's faithfulness in providing for him day after day beside the Brook Cherith; he could not have developed the warm, brotherly affection for Elisha, becoming virtually a "father" to him, if he had not first learned to love and care for a desperate widow and her son in the dangerous region of Zarephath. Each step along his ministry, each episode encountered was another lesson in faith in the School of the Spirit.

Likewise, we find OURSELVES receiving a SIMILAR education from OUR teacher, JESUS CHRIST. Every opportunity, regardless how wonderful or tragic, becomes another occasion to exercise our faith and learn in what is the classroom of God. Through life, we TOO have experiences which are meant to reveal to us our OWN weaknesses and limitations, but also our continuing need to recognize God's presence IN US and IN THE MIDST of those situations. We are NEVER alone, NEVER forsaken by him and if we can REMEMBER that, then we can pass each trial with flying colors.

And if, as Elijah discovered, life is a university where the GREATEST lessons—lessons in faith and lessons in love--are waiting to be learned, it then begs the question of what is the GOAL of all this education? Well, as you will hear me say again and again, the AIM AND OVER-ALL OBJECTIVE of our lives as Christians is really one of MATURITY, of EVER-EXPANDING and EVER-INCREASING GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT- both in our LOVE FOR GOD and in our LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER. It is to embrace that same ambition St. Paul had set for his OWN life when he told the church at Philippi, "O that I might know him and

the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death, if by any means I might obtain unto the resurrection of the dead.” Our one objective as children of God and as members of his Body, the Church of Jesus Christ, should be THIS: GREATER DEPTH AND EXPANSIVENESS IN OUR RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST AND TO ONE ANOTHER. It should be an enlarged mind from a never-ending hunger to learn more about God allied with an enlarged heart with enlarged sympathies and with ever-enlarging commitments. We should be deeper, wiser, and more committed persons TODAY than we were TEN YEARS AGO, and even MORE in ten years than we are NOW. I cannot repeat enough, that the aim or goal of our lives as Christians is NOT to become more ethical persons- morality is nothing more than a BY-PRODUCT of growth and maturity. After all, were not the Pharisees among the most ethical persons in the ancient world? Rather, it is to become MORE ADULT, MORE MATURE as Christians. As St. Paul explained to the Ephesians, speaking of the purpose the Holy Spirit had imparted spiritual gifts to them in the FIRST PLACE:

“The gifts he gave his Church were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, *until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine...but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.*” (Ephesians 4:11-15a)

And if you need a quick barometer to determine whether we actually ARE growing in our spiritual lives, whether we ARE maturing into the kind of person God would have us to be- THE IMAGE OF HIS ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON, we only need to ask ourselves: Do I have a deep and abiding love for JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF and NOT MERELY a commitment to a church or a denomination, a commitment that is purely formal and routine? Is there a sincere desire to sit quietly in his presence and try to listen to his voice, or share with him my highest joys or worst fears? Do I seek to know his will for that day and then make it a point of trying to be faithful to whatever it is God may be speaking to me about? Do read his Word regularly and try to learn as much as I can about him so that I can respond better to HIS wants, thereby deepening my relationship with him in every way? Do I generously and spontaneously respond to serious needs when they arise and, like the Good Samaritan, am I willing to inconvenience myself on behalf of another who may not be in a position to help him or herself? If there truly IS growth and maturity going on in our lives, then the over-riding ambition of our lives should be similar to that expressed in one of my favorite hymns:

*More love to Thee, O Christ, More love to Thee!
Hear Thou the prayer I make On bend-ed knee.
This is my ear-nest plea:
More love, O Christ, to Thee,
More love to Thee, More love to Thee!*

And then THIRDLY, when we see Elijah’s relationship to Elisha, we can learn something about the necessity of CULTIVATING DISCIPLES. The only way a church CAN grow is when each of its members take seriously the Great Commission that Jesus gave to his followers just before he left them, that they were to go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that he commanded them. Jesus was saying that it’s not enough to simply

show up on Sunday mornings, sing a few hymns, listen to the sermon, place a few dollars in the collection plate, and then afterwards congratulate ourselves for having done our duty for the week. That commission which Jesus gave to his disciples was not just limited to the eleven but is now the responsibility of the WHOLE church, of EVERY ONE of us AS WELL. This is as much OUR mandate, OUR marching orders, OUR job description- and not just on SUNDAYS but EVERY day of the week.

Perhaps you've seen those church signs which beside the word "Pastor" is NOT the name of the minister of the church but "Every Member" instead. THAT'S what the church is meant to be- a body in which EVERY member is functioning as the minister, in which EVERY member is biblically-FORMED, spiritually-INFORMED, and able to share his or her faith with others. That's what the Church reformers meant by "the priesthood of all believers" and why Peter in his First Epistle refers to the Church in general as a "ROYAL PRIESTHOOD."

My friends, these are just a FEW of the lessons I have come away with in our study of Elijah- you probably have your own. But I hope and pray that, LIKE MYSELF, you TOO can see yourselves enrolled in God's "School of the Spirit," that you likewise find YOURSELVES sitting at the feet of our Lord- listening to his words, learning from his example, and experiencing a greater depth in your relationship with him and with others. As a result, you will find yourselves touching any number of lives, leaving them yearning to undergo the very same adventure in the very same classroom YOU are now in. Amen and amen.