

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.”

But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel.

³ The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” Elisha replied, “but do not speak of it.”

⁴ Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.”

And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho.

⁵ The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” he replied, “but do not speak of it.”

⁶ Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.”

And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on.

⁷ Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

¹⁰ “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise not.”

¹¹ 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. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. (2 Kings 2:1-12a)

Elijah Leads Us to Christ

Is our world too modern for the transfiguration? Is it too modern for Elijah going up to heaven in whirlwind? This morning our Old Testament lesson starts with the words, **“When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind.”** The Bible presents this event as a fact, just as the gospels present Jesus’ transfiguration as a fact. Does that ever bother you? I would understand if it did. Don’t we sometimes wrestle with these miracle stories in the Bible? So many people want to treat them as myths and legends – no different from the stories of Greek mythology or any other ancient myths. But God says these things happened, so we will take him at his word. But why did they happen? Why did God record them? If you look at 1500 years of Jewish history in the Bible, it’s actually pretty scanty. God picks and chooses what he writes down. So what does God say to us today with this account? That’s what we want to consider this morning as we look at the end of Elijah’s time on this earth. The answer is going to be pretty simple: **Elijah leads us to Christ.**

I.

How does that work? Elijah lived more than 800 years before Jesus was born. He never saw the baby in the manger or heard Jesus preach. But his story is Jesus’ story. In truth, all the Bible is really about Jesus. Elijah is one step from the Garden of Eden to the cross of Christ. Today, we have the story of the end of Elijah’s life on earth. It was probably the easiest end of life we can imagine. There was no painful surgery or chemo, no fear and wondering. Elijah just went from this world to the next. Everyone in the story clearly knew that was going to happen. The story begins with Elijah and Elisha walking toward the town of Gilgal. Elijah tells Elisha to stay there while he goes on to Bethel. Why did he ask Elisha to stay behind? I think it’s fair to say that this was a kind of final test for Elisha, who clearly understood what was going to happen, but he didn’t know where. So he refuses to leave him. Elijah tries to shake him a couple more times. As they walk along,

various groups of prophets tell Elisha that this is Elijah's last day on earth. Finally, when they cross the Jordan River, it happens. A chariot and horses of fire sweep down and carry Elijah up to heaven.

Elijah's body went to heaven. That of course is very different from what will happen to us when our lives end. There are some things that are the same: once his time here was over, it was over. The chariot and horsemen were most likely angels and the Bible does speak of the angels carrying us to heaven. But when we die, our bodies are going to stay here. They'll be buried or cremated or lost at sea. Our souls will be with Jesus, to be sure. But our bodies will have to wait until he comes back.

So why did Elijah go straight to heaven? It wasn't because he was so good. Rather, God was underlining his plan to save us. On the way to meet the chariot, Elijah divided the Jordan River they walked across. That reminds us of Moses dividing the Red Sea, but also of Joshua who divided the Jordan River to bring the children of Israel into the Promised Land. God was tying Elijah back to the greatest events of Israel's history and telling his people that he and Elisha represented the next step. When God took him directly to heaven, that reminded the people what the point of the whole plan was. We really do "go to heaven" when we die. I've said that hundreds of times at funerals and in hospital rooms. But we can't see it. The soul is invisible and I don't think any doctor is ever going to invent a "soul-o-meter" that can detect it. So this one time in the Old Testament, God had a prophet physically and visibly ascend into heaven so that we can see that is the goal.

That means that death does not win. Elijah ascended because it was never God's plan that only our souls would be with him in heaven. God always planned to redeem our bodies, too. When we die, we win. But because our bodies have to stay here, because age and disease and hard use break these bodies and make them weaker than God ever intended, sin and death seem to win when we die. But that's only an illusion. Jesus is coming back and he will raise these bodies and we will live with him. He's going to remake these bodies so that they are perfect. What hurts the most today? Your hip? Your back? What do you hate about yourself? Your weight? Your wrinkles? Your bad eyesight? All those things will be gone when we rise.

All those things are the result of sin. When we rise, our bodies will be free from what sin does to us. But that wouldn't be a blessing if we had to live in a world that was still full of sin and pain. God didn't ask Elijah to live forever here. He took him home. When Elijah comes back with Christ – when we come back with him if we die before that day – we will come back to a perfect world, a world fit for Christ and for his people to live in. Elijah shows us all that. **Elijah leads us to Christ. He ascended to show us the way home.**

II.

This account is unique in the Scriptures. God builds on it to help his people see clearly what he was doing. God tied Elijah back to Moses and Joshua and the founding of the people of Israel. But then God pointed them forward. Hundreds of years later after Elijah ascended in the whirlwind, God spoke through Isaiah and Malachi and promised that Elijah would return before Christ came. To this day, observant Jews are waiting for him. If you ever have the chance to go to a Jewish Passover meal, at the end of the table, you'll find a cup of wine set at a place where no one sits. That cup of wine is for Elijah. Before the meal ends, someone will get up and look out the door to see if he's come this year for Passover.

Unfortunately, that practice does not reflect a clear understanding of what God was planning. Jesus says that Elijah has already come. He was not speaking of the transfiguration. Certainly, Elijah appeared there and spoke with Jesus just as we heard in our gospel lesson for today. Jesus showed the disciples a glimpse of eternal life while they were there on the mountain. He showed them the dead living. And they saw Jesus as he really is, as he will appear when we see him in heaven. Most days, Jesus didn't look like that. You couldn't tell that he was the Son of God except when he did a miracle. But in heaven it will be clear. So God made it clear on the mount of transfiguration.

Elijah was there. But that was not the fulfillment of the prophecy. The true fulfillment was John the Baptist. He came in the power and the spirit of Elijah. He dressed like Elijah in leather and a camel's hair cloak. He lived out in the desert, just like Elijah had to do for most of his ministry. Most important of all, he came to call God's people to repent. He came to prepare the way for Jesus. That's really what Elijah did, too. Elijah lived during an age of idolatry and unfaithfulness. The king and queen of Israel were idol worshippers who tried again and again to kill him. At one point in Elijah's ministry, God said that out of the whole population of Israel – maybe two million souls – there were only seven thousand people who were faithful to him. Elijah's job was to call them to repent and bring them back.

That was John the Baptist's job too. Elijah is a living prophecy of the man who would point out Jesus when he came. He is a living lesson for you and me in an age of unbelief and impenitence. How many times have we wrung our hands over how godless our age has become? How often do we feel that standing up for what we believe in is only going to get us hurt? That's what Jesus said: in the last days, the love of most would grow cold. There is a war against our faith. The devil is leading the charge. He knows the secret sinful desires of our hearts. He knows the weakness and the frustration we feel. He knows how dark it all looks to us, and he whispers in our ears and tells us to just give up. What's the point of living like some old fashioned, narrow minded, bigoted Christian anymore? You're only hurting yourself, he says. It will be so much better if you come over to his side. And of course, from a worldly point of view, it will be. The unbelieving world will welcome us and celebrate us if we leave behind all that God says.

But Elijah reminds us that God has always had a plan for us. It's no accident that we live at this time and in this place, any more than it was an accident that Elijah lived when he did. Yes, it's hard. It was hard for Elijah, too. At one point, he prayed to die. But God gave him the strength to stand up under persecution and to proclaim the coming Christ. God preserved that faithful remnant of Israel and continued to build on it. God sent a chariot of fire to give a message not to Elijah, but to Elisha and to all the company of prophets who were watching, and to the children of Israel as they waited for Christ, and to every generation of Christians: we will win in the end. We will win, because Jesus won. He died because that's what he came here to do, not because he lost some political contest. He died to pay for our sins. He died for all the sin in this world that makes our lives hurt. And then he rose and he promised us that new body and that new world and that new life with him. When our time is done, the angels will carry us in triumph to heaven and we will celebrate there until we rise from the dead.

Until we go there, God shows us Jesus' glory, not by light shining from his face, but through the preaching of his love. When Elijah ascended, Elisha ran after him, shouting "**My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!**" He wasn't talking about the chariot of fire. Years later, when Elisha was on his own deathbed, the king of Israel came to see him and said almost these exact words to him. There was no chariot of fire then. Elijah and Elisha were the chariots and horsemen of Israel. The number one way that God takes care of us is through the good news about Jesus. He works in that gospel message to strengthen us, to guide us, to lead us to come to him in prayer and to rejoice in all that he does for us. God sends pastors and teachers to guard and keep us here, from cradle to grave. From the visit your pastor made to you and your mother in the hospital where you were born, to the day you were baptized, to the Sunday school and Lutheran elementary school classes where you learned of your Savior, to the church services you attended all your life, to the hospital calls and the shut-in visits that nurtured your faith as your body failed, to day when you leave this life, and your pastor will gladly be sitting by your side – in all that God calls chariots and horsemen of Israel to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to you, to crush the devil's efforts to steal your faith, to forgive you and strengthen you until you see him face to face.

God showed that by letting Elisha continue Elijah's ministry. The firstborn son in those days received a double portion of his father's estate. Elisha was Elijah's spiritual heir, so he got a double portion of his spirit. In the verses after our text, he used Elijah's cloak to divide the Jordan River. The prophets said that spirit of Elijah was resting him. That Holy Spirit continues to work today and will continue until our Savior returns. And all the good we ministers ever do comes from the Holy Spirit working through that good news about Jesus. **Elijah leads us to Christ. He served as a prophecy of our Savior.**

Today is the Festival of Transfiguration. Today, God gives us a glimpse of eternal life when he shows us his Son as we will see him there. Elijah stands in heaven today, seeing that sight. His body went there to remind us that our bodies will live in Christ's presence forever. Is this a true story? Absolutely. Is the world too modern to hear these twin accounts? Maybe so. But that's the power of sin. We have a greater power: the power of the gospel. Jesus went down that mountain and went to Jerusalem and laid down his life so that we will live. He rose so that we will rise. He ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us. And he is coming back to take us there. Amen.