

## “Chariot of Fire”

1 Kings 19.1-15a

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We have a story here about two prophets: two holy servants of God, one younger, one older; one just starting his ministry, the other’s ministry coming to an end. Sort of. Their names are Elijah and Elisha; they are the two great biblical prophets of the ninth century BC. Their stories are told in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. They are venerated as saints in the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and other parts of Christianity. Jews and Muslims honor both of them as prophets.

It is a story about the passing of a baton: a baton of servanthood, of prophetic power. It is traditionally described as the passing of a *mantle*. That’s just another word for a *cloak*, a garment worn over a tunic. Specifically, *Elijah’s* mantle, which – by the time the story is over – ends up in Elisha’s hands. That mantle represents the *office* which Elijah had served – an office which now passes to Elisha.

About eight years have passed since Elijah ran for his life from the wicked queen Jezebel, the story we explored last week. Jezebel is still alive, though her husband Ahab has died. Jezebel is no longer trying to kill Elijah, thankfully, but Elijah continued to have periodic run-ins with members of the royal family, who really had no interest in serving or the Lord God or following the teachings of Moses. The Israelite religion was becoming marginalized – and the country’s leaders didn’t care.

But some people, like Elijah and Elisha, cared a very great deal. They were determined to continue following God, continue ministering in God’s name, continue speaking God’s word, even if that made them unwelcome or unpopular. They modeled an attitude that we Christians need to have too. In an era when lots of people just don’t care about God – *we* need to care. *We* need to keep following, ministering in God’s name, speaking God’s word – even if that makes *us* unwelcome or unpopular.

One of the things that God had told Elijah to do when Elijah went to Mount Sinai was to go find a certain young man named Elisha, the son of a wealthy landowner – a farmer’s boy – and appoint him as Elijah’s successor. Elisha left his oxen, kissed his parents goodbye, and “set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.” (1 Kings 19:21) Like when Jesus called James and John to leave their fishing nets and follow him – leaving their father behind in the boat. Except I’m not sure the dad got a goodbye kiss!

So Elisha became Elijah’s disciple, the same way that – nine hundred years later – a dozen men became disciples of Jesus. As Elijah continued his prophetic ministry – speaking on behalf of God, performing various kinds of miracles – Elisha followed alongside, watching and learning from his master.

But all good relationships eventually come to an end. Elijah is about to leave Elisha, and everyone seems to know it: Elijah knows it, Elisha knows it, a group of prophets in the city of Bethel know it, another group of prophets in Jericho know it. God sends Elijah from one city to the next, and Elisha walks right by his side, determined to stay with his master right up to the very end. According to Jewish tradition, Elijah and Elisha were having a rich conversation on that final journey together; one rabbi says that they were discussing the *Shema*, the central Jewish teaching from Deuteronomy 6: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus would later lift that up as the most important commandment in the entire Jewish Law. Other rabbis say that Elijah and Elisha were discussing the consolations of Jerusalem, or the mysteries of creation, or the chariot they were about to behold. This was Elijah’s last opportunity to pass on any important pieces of wisdom and learning to his protégé.

Elijah and Elisha come to the river Jordan. Elijah takes his cloak – his mantle – rolls it up and strikes the water with it. The water parts, separating to two sides, just as the Red Sea parted for the Israelites during their escape from Egypt, just as the Jordan had parted for all Israel, forty years later. This was Elijah’s final miracle. He had performed a number of miracles during his ministry – multiplying flour and oil for a widow during a drought; raising that widow’s son from the dead; calling down fire from heaven (on multiple occasions), among others – but this was the last. There would be no more.

The two prophets cross on dry ground to the other side. They are all alone. Elijah turns to his student and asks: “What can I do for you before I am taken from you?” What is your *final wish* from me, my student? What *one last thing* can I do to prepare you for the ministry you are about to inherit?

Elisha does not hesitate: “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.” A double portion! As great as Elijah was, as many good things he did for God and the people of God – Elisha wants to *double* it. And, indeed, he will; Elisha goes on to perform many more miracles than Elijah. I have seen three different lists of the miracles of Elijah and Elisha. The lists disagree on how many miracles there were – one list said Elijah performed eight, another said he performed fourteen, a third said *sixteen* (it all depends on how you count them; which events in the Bible actually count as “miracles”) – but all three lists agree on this: Elisha performed exactly *double* the number of miracles that Elijah performed. Instead of 8, there were 16; or instead of 14, there were 28; or instead of 16, there were 32! I will leave it to you to read the stories for yourself, count the miracles, and see which number is the most accurate!

They continue walking and talking. What a blessing Elisha received – instruction from his master, right up until the very end. The disciples of Jesus didn’t get that. But then, they had all abandoned him the night before. Elisha stayed with his master, all the way. Suddenly there appears a chariot of fire. A *single* chariot of fire, just *one* – though if you want to see *multiple* chariots of fire you should read 2 Kings 6. (Did you know that the Oscar-winning movie got its name from a phrase in the Bible?) So a *single* chariot of fire, being pulled by horses, also of fire. The horses and the chariot race right between the two prophets, separating them from each other. Then comes a whirlwind, a tempest – the same Hebrew word is used for the storm that assails the boat that Jonah travel in (before he gets swallowed by a whale), and for the whirlwind that God appears in (in the book of Job). The whirlwind scoops up Elijah and carries him off to heaven. Down below, Elisha is hollering out: “My father! My

father!” – calling out to his paternal mentor one last time – then he exclaims: “The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” Years later, when Elisha is lying on his deathbed, a student of Elisha’s will say the very same thing: “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” (2 Kings 13:14) That phrase only appears twice in the Bible – once when Elijah leaves this earth, and once when Elisha does.

But Elijah has not died. He has ascended into heaven, but *he did not die*. I used to think that there were only two people in the Old Testament who didn’t die: Elijah, here in this story, and Enoch, who shows up in a genealogy back in Genesis. “Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.” (Genesis 5:24) Recently I learned that there were legends about Melchizedek, King of Salem and Priest of the Most High God, who also makes a brief appearance in Genesis (Genesis 14:18-20), suggesting that he, too, was taken to heaven without dying. The book of Hebrews in the New Testament alludes to those legends. So Elijah was the third – and (I think!) the last – of the great spiritual masters among the ancient Israelites ascended into heaven without dying.

Jesus, of course, did *both*. He died, *and* he ascended.

Elisha is left standing there, at the bank of the river, looking up to where his master has gone, like the disciples of Jesus would do much later on. Distressed, he takes his own cloak and rips it into two pieces. But on the ground nearby is the cloak that had belonged to Elijah. It got left behind. Elijah scoops it up. It will be a tangible reminder of his beloved master. He approaches the flowing river. Taking Elijah’s cloak, Elisha reaches down and strikes the water, the same way Elijah had done. This is it, the first true test of his mettle. Does he have Elijah’s power? Can *he* do miracles too?

Yes. Yes, he can. He has indeed received the gift of miracles. The water parts. Elisha heads back across the river. There is a new prophet in the land of Israel. The Israelite religion may not be very popular – but there is still someone committed enough to do his part for the Lord God Almighty.

There come those times when a beloved mentor leaves. Maybe they ascend into heaven, maybe they die, maybe they retire. Blessed are those who are committed enough to take their place.

As for Elijah ... well, his part in the story is not yet done. Five hundred years later, the prophet Malachi will utter a prophecy from God: “God will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” (Malachi 4:5) God would send Elijah back here, one more time. Four centuries later, some people wondered if Jesus were Elijah. No, Jesus is not Elijah returned. Someone else is. When John the Baptist was out in the wilderness, near the Jordan, perhaps in the same vicinity where Elijah was taken into heaven, some priests asked him, “Are you Elijah?” (John 1:21) John said no, he was not. That’s interesting ... because Jesus himself says that he *was*: “If you are willing to accept it, *he (John) is the Elijah who was to come.*” (Matthew 11:13-14; cf. Matthew 17:12) John did not *think* he was Elijah returned ... but *Jesus says he was*. I’m inclined to think Jesus knew what he was talking about.

Elijah makes one final appearance, when James and Peter and John behold a transfigured Jesus having a conversation with Elijah and Moses. I wonder what they were talking about. I wonder what Jesus knew that Elijah needed to hear ... or what *Elijah* knew that *Jesus* needed to hear.

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