

**Psalm 77:11-20**

**2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14**

**Galatians 5:13-25**

**Luke 9:51-62**

**Hymn: 107 (God Moves in a Mysterious Way)**

**Homilist: Maury Jackson**

**Title:** Where is the Lord God of Elijah?

**Topic:** Spiritual Inheritance

**Theme:** God's default position: his normal mode of action

**Thesis:** God's spirit is granted to those who are receptive to the call and faithful to the task of being creative agents of grace and justice.

**Transitional Question:** How can this story be meaningful to the myriads of humans who will never encounter chariots of fire?

### Get in Line for the Chariot Ride

Melody and verse give tribute to the story of Elijah's fiery chariot ride. The American Spiritual musical composers invoked those "horsemen of Israel" when they sang "*Why don't you swing down sweet chariot stop and let me ride*" or the more famous "*Swing low sweet chariot coming for to carry me home.*" Elijah's fiery taxi ride to heaven funds our imagination with pictures so powerful that we dare not hope against their truthfulness. The musical witnesses resound in song that warning that we should not bet against this story being true. So then, I want to believe the story. I want to believe it in detail. I want to believe it as a testimony to the power of a righteous life. I want to believe it as a testimony to the power of the God of Israel. I want to believe it as a trustworthy record of the history of salvation.

And yet, this desire at times seems infantile. It is a desire that lets slip my longing to live into the picture role of a primary Sabbath School class. It speaks

to my desire to escape the world I know (with its tilt to brokenness and suffering) and to live in another world: a magical world. But this story not only captivates because of childhood church memories. In addition, it is captivating for all who (like the enslaved composers of those sacred spirituals) desire rescue from the world's strangling power. Elijah's fiery chariot ride speaks of a supernatural realm. When the world appears too limiting, it hints of an otherworldly power that is unlimited. And when the world appears to be all there is: (an unlimited force that suffocates human will and hope) Elijah's story waves to another reality. That other reality stands as a limiting force over against the reality of this world.<sup>1</sup>

What is the story? It is simple. Elijah is a famous prophet in Israel who is on a farewell campaign to three seminaries of ancient Israel. He goes first to the prophetic school at Gilgal. Then he goes to the school at Bethel. Lastly, he goes to the school at Jericho. Elijah's companion, Elisha, follows him and refuses to leave his side. At each place, the students or company of prophets tell Elisha that that very day the LORD will take his master, Elijah, away from him. Elisha tells them he knows and shut up. Finally, when Elijah and Elisha come to the Jordan River Elijah takes off his mantle strikes the water and like Moses at the Red Sea, the waters part for the two men to cross over. The Elijah asks Elisha what he wanted him to do for him before he leaves. Elisha makes a strange request for inheritance. It is strange for two reasons: first, he asks to inherit twice as much as the prophet possesses and second, he asks not for material property

but for the immaterial spiritual resources of Elijah's God. Elijah takes of his mantle, passes the mantle and is carried into heaven by a whirlwind.<sup>ii</sup>

Yet, the exciting details in the story are also the most uninviting. So what if God miraculously carried Elijah into heaven? Experience in this life teaches us that if you are waiting for God to act in this way for your cause, get in line behind millions more. Get behind those who hear from their physician that medical science hasn't advanced enough to cure their physical maladies. Get behind the people who hunger for a crust of bread. Get behind the parents who suffer the horrifying effects of war. Get behind those struggling with drug addictions with their imprisoned biochemistry and chained imagination.

#### The Spiritual Blues Lament God's Default Position

For me, the trouble with the Elijah story is that God's default way of acting in our world is what we are more likely to experience. And maybe this is where we should place our realistic hopes for divine help. Maybe we should not ask what this story says about God's extraordinary work. But rather we should ask how this story can be meaningful to myriads of humans who will never encounter chariots of fire. (Unless they are instruments of war: tanks offering not rescue to heaven but an early damnation in a hellish grave.)

The sacred musical tradition of ancient Israel seems to share my sentiment that these stories can trade our peace for anxiety. If God can do this for Elijah, then why not do this for every person. The Psalm of Asaph (Psalm 77) bemoans the apparent absence of God in the world. This musician sings about his

sleepless night in search of the God of old. With the energy of an insomniac matched only by the discipline of a Buddhist monk, he meditates through the night on why God refuses to step in and rescue him from trouble. He is disturbed by the seeming inactivity of God and writes,

I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago. I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit: "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" And I say, "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed." iii

This sacred musician takes what were affirmations in the Israelite worshipping community and turns them into skeptical questions. He is singing that secular spiritual better known as the blues.<sup>iv</sup> He has been spurned by his lover. His love has ended in broken promises and angry betrayal. His lover is Yahweh. Still this person of faith stubbornly refuses to look forward to the future and God's new way of acting in the world. Rather he continues to reminisce and recall what God has done in the past writing:

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds...You are a God who works wonders...Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.<sup>v</sup>

But is this past not the very problem? The footprints of God are left unseen.

Where might we look to find the footprints of God? What standard of measurement can we invent to determine its size? What animal can we send to track the divine scent?

## Don't Let the Wrong Ancestor Take You for a Ride

Central to the story of Elijah's ascension into heaven, is the call of his successor Elisha. It is more a story of sharing: of passing the torch than it is of taking: of God's fiery chariot rescue. This is about inheritance. Contrast what is going on around the text and what happens in the text. On the one hand we have inheritance lost. We witness the end of the Omri dynasty: an inheritance that is fading fast.<sup>vi</sup> There is also the end of an inherited pure water source for the city of Jericho.<sup>vii</sup> This bad water cistern causes sterility and no offspring inherit the work and wealth of Jericho's citizens. A generation: forty-two boys are disinherited because of their rudeness to the prophet Elisha.<sup>viii</sup> And King Mesha of Moab disinherits his son by offering him as a human sacrifice to Chemosh in order to overthrow the invading Israeli-Judean-Edomite armies.<sup>ix</sup>

These episodes of inheritance-lost bracket the episode of inheritance-offered and received. Elisha shows the loyalty of a son to Elijah. He will not leave his side. As Linda Hinton notes:

The company of the prophets is a group of prophets whose leaders are referred to as fathers...In Israelite families, the firstborn son is to receive a double portion of everything belonging to his father (see Deuteronomy 21:7). Elisha requests such a double inheritance of the prophetic spirit from his spiritual father, Elijah."<sup>x</sup>

But if Elisha receives double the inheritance, why was it that messiah was considered to be the Elijah who is to come?<sup>xi</sup>

## Pick Up the Mantle: Live by the Spirit

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*

How can we reclaim for Christ a world which has come of age...God is teaching us that we must live as people who can get along very well without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us. Matthew makes it crystal clear that it is not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us, but by his weakness and suffering.<sup>xii</sup>

What if spiritual inheritance means that God does less-and-less of the work of heaven for our world and humans (filled with God's spirit) do more-and-more of the work of heaven in this world? What if Jesus' promise that his disciples would do greater works than he<sup>xiii</sup> is true because we inherit from him the life of God? What if the real good news of the story of Elijah is that God is not really interested in taking humankind out of this world (into the life of heaven) but rather God is more interested to bring God's life into this world? We can be caught up into the life of God right now. And so John the Elder writes "Now are we the children of God and it does not yet appear what we shall be."<sup>xiv</sup> And so Jesus says, "He who believes in me has already past from death to life."<sup>xv</sup>

## Feel the Fire

The story ends with Elisha picking up where Elijah left off:

Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back

and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and the other, and Elisha went over (2 Kings 2:12).

The mantle has been passed over. Only this time it is warmed by the fire of heaven. And even though the words of the Psalmist might still ring true about God's way, i.e., "You are a God who works wonders...Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen<sup>xvi</sup> we need not despair. Let us not misunderstand the real purpose of this metaphor. The mantle is not passed so that Elisha can merely strike the bank of the Jordan (and magically part the water) in order that he might pass over. It is passed so that the waters of Jericho can now be useful for thirsty workers to drink and little girls and boys to bathe. God's footprints are detected in transformed lives.

Those of us who are disciples of the man from Galilee have heard the story of another Elisha. One whose name also means 'God will save': Joshua. One day he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And there he conversed with Elijah and Moses. There his body was transfigured and his mission was transformed. There he identified not with the grandeur and glory of Moses and Elijah but with the humility of their junior protégés: Joshua and Elisha. He saw a destiny for God in this world that was more subtle. God's work will not be bundled and concentrated in fiery chariots and horsemen. God's power will now be dispersed. And it will be dispersed to those who are receptive to the call and

faithful to the task of being creative agents of grace and justice. Can you feel it?



## ENDNOTES

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Kaufman, Gordon. *An Essay on Theological Method 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1995), 93.
- <sup>ii</sup> 2 Kings 2:1-14.
- <sup>iii</sup> NRSV. Psalm 77:5-10.
- <sup>iv</sup> Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 97-127.
- <sup>v</sup> NRSV. Psalm 11ff.
- <sup>vi</sup> 2 Kings 1:17-18.
- <sup>vii</sup> 2 Kings 2:19-22.
- <sup>viii</sup> 2 Kings 2:23-25.
- <sup>ix</sup> 2 Kings 3:4-27.
- <sup>x</sup> Hinton, Linda B. *1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings Basic Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 80.
- <sup>xi</sup> Cf. Malachi 4:4-6 & Mark 8:27-30; Matthew 16:14; Luke 9:18-19.
- <sup>xii</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Religionless Christianity* quoted in *Readings in Christian Thought* ed. Hugh T Kerr (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1966), 366.
- <sup>xiii</sup> John 14:12.
- <sup>xiv</sup> 1 John 3:2-3.
- <sup>xv</sup> John 5:24.
- <sup>xvi</sup> NRSV. Psalm 11ff.