

“Chariots of Fire”

2 Kings 2: 1-18

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. ³ The company of prophets[Ⓜ] who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”

⁴ Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. ⁵ The company of prophets[Ⓜ] who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”

⁶ Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. ⁷ Fifty men of the company of prophets[Ⓜ] also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸ Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” ¹⁰ He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” ¹¹ As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹² 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.

¹³ He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ 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 to the other, and Elisha went over.

¹⁵ When the company of prophets[Ⓜ] who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. ¹⁶ They said to him, "See now, we have fifty strong men among your servants; please let them go and seek your master; it may be that the spirit of the LORD has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley." He responded, "No, do not send them." ¹⁷ But when they urged him until he was ashamed, he said, "Send them." So they sent fifty men who searched for three days but did not find him. ¹⁸ When they came back to him (he had remained at Jericho), he said to them, "Did I not say to you, Do not go?"

It is funny how the Spirit of God gives us the words we need to restore our souls at the time when we need to hear them the most. This is true for our text this morning, even if they come to us through a very weird story found in our Bible. In our story, we find mystery, awe, and wonder. We also find a reminder of the continuity of community. We also find a call for the next generation to pick up the mantle of leadership so that the work of the Kingdom of God continues. In this unusual story we find the Spirit of God telling us once more that although generations pass away, they never really leave us. Their wisdom remains. Their guidance remains. Their passion for justice remains. These things are now gifts. They are now legacies. These things are now stepping stones for the next generation to carry on their work. Because now these things serve as a reminder to us, the community at large, that, no matter how bad it may seem, God is always

moving in and among the people, bringing forth new life, just like God has done since the beginning of time.

I have to tell you this morning that I am in a very different place, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally than I was at the beginning of the week when I started to engage this weird text found in our Bible. At first as I read through this story of Elijah and Elisha, I was fascinated by the whirlwind. I was captivated by the power and might this whirlwind represents. As I read through this story of Elijah and Elisha, all I could see was the chariot of fire, taking Elijah away. I was drawn to the mystery, awe, and wonder of this event, celebrating how this story is truly a testimony to Elijah's faithfulness as God's prophet.

Yet, as the week continued, and I kept hearing about the increasing numbers of those who have passed away from complications from Covid, as the week continued and I heard about the passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, as the week continued and I felt the wider community's sense of disillusionment with institutions falling heavily upon my shoulders, my focus in this story changed. Now, as I read this story of Elijah and Elisha, I am drawn to those left behind. I resonate with Elisha as he stood on the riverbank, filled with grief. I resonate with those when they discovered Elijah, their great prophet, was gone, began to lose hope. Now as I read through this story of Elijah and Elisha, I wonder at the gap of leadership left behind after Elijah was taken up, and who

would or who could fill this gap, especially in a time when the community so desperately needed prophetic leaders so that the work of the Lord would continue.

I realized this week as I kept coming back to this story over and over again, that I could easily stay in this depressing place, letting the story end here. But thankfully, the Spirit of God invited me to take another look at our text, this time opening my eyes to see the new beginning which was forming in their midst for Elisha and the wider community. As I took another look at this text, this time, my eyes were drawn to verses 12-14. I invite us to hear these words again: “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 to the other, and Elisha went over.”

Notice that in Elisha’s grief, he picked up the mantle of Elijah and went to stand on the riverbank. He didn’t wait around for another person to do so. Elisha didn’t look around for that elusive “someone” to complete the task which he knew needed to be done. No, Elisha, in his grief, in his hurt, picked up Elijah’s legacy of

prophetic leadership and began his journey, continuing the work of the Lord for the people of God. He became the leader his community needed him to be by embracing Elijah's wisdom, by embracing Elijah's guidance, by embracing Elijah's example of leading God's people.

And still the story does not end there. Elisha calls out to God, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" Elisha knows that Elijah's legacy is one of faithfulness. And that for God to be the God of Elijah, to inspire such faithfulness, God has to act in such a way which shows this world will never have the last word, to act in such a way which shows that the story does not end in grief and hurt, that the story does not end at the banks of the river with no way to cross.

So Elisha strikes the water and the waters part. This very action brings to mind all the times in Israel's past when God acted, bringing the people safely through to the other side. The parting of the Red Sea, the parting of the Jordan so that the people could make their way into the promise land. Elisha's action reminds us that God has never forgotten the people of God and God is not about to start now. Elisha is now the next called prophetic leader in a long line of leaders for the people of Israel, a line that goes all the way back to Abraham and Moses. Elisha's action of striking the water shows us, the wider community, that the mantle of leadership has been passed on to a new generation. It is a sign for the people that

all hope is not lost. God is there, moving in and among the people, bringing forth new life, just like God has done since the beginning of time.

Because you see, what Elisha learned that day, and what remains true for us as people of faith still today is that the work of the Kingdom of God is not left to simply one individual. Nor does that work end simply because one generation passes away. The work of the Kingdom of God requires all of us, coming together, building upon the previous generations' legacy of wisdom and guidance, building upon their legacy of grace and a passion for justice, The work of the Kingdom of God requires all of us not waiting around for that elusive someone to do the task that we know that needs to be done so that healing and wholeness will come for all of God's people. The Kingdom of God is about God calling all of us to pick up the mantle of prophetic leadership and begin to make a way out of no way for all of God's people, just like God did for Elisha in our text, and just like God has done since the beginning of time.

Because the beauty of this weird text found in our Bible is that it reminds us that yes we are not alone. But it also reminds us of the continuity of community. We are our "grandmothers' prayers. We are our grandfathers' dreamings. We are the breath of our ancestors. We are the mothers who marched. We are the fathers

who dreamed great visions. We are seekers of truth and keepers of faith, we are makers of peace. We are the wisdom of ages. We are the Community of God.”

Again this week, I stand before you with not all the answers but I know I stand before you as one who is part of a long line of leaders for the people of God who have not always had all the answers either. Yet time and time again, for all these leaders, one thing remained true. We know that our God is faithful and that God will continue to act in ways to bring healing and wholeness for all of God’s people, just like God did for Elijah, just like God did for Elisha, and just like God did for all the generations of God’s people now and forevermore. Amen.