

Chariots of Fire

A Sermon by The Rev. Ken Calhoun

First United Methodist Church Athens, Texas

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II Kings 2:1-2; 5-14

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 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. . . .

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."

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 no leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and tolled 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.

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." 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." 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. 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.

Most of the stories that we have in the Old Testament, especially those that are from before the Exile in Babylon, the pre-exilic times, most of those stories came to us not in written form initially, but for generations they were passed from one generation to the next orally. They were told around the dinner table or over a campfire or while watching over a flock of animals in the night. The stories became ingrained in the community in that fashion. So this morning, this story which comes from the pre-exilic period is a story I'm going to tell you, rather than read it to you out of the scriptures.

The story is about the passing of the torch from Elijah, the chief pre-exilic prophet of the Hebrew people, to his protégé and follower, Elisha. Elijah had been wandering in the wilderness where he had confronted the prophets of Baal and overcome them, and he set out on a journey, and he traveled to the city of Bethel, modern-day Bethlehem. And when he arrived at Beth-el, there was a group of students. The prophets often had persons who would follow them and hang on their every word. That's how we got many of their prophecies; those students would remember those words and repeat them over and over. So you had a group of these—we'll call them theology students—who met him at Beth-el and began following him about. Well, he left Bethel to go to Jericho, and when he left, he said to the students there, "You stay here. You stay here. I'm going to Jericho. I have a long journey to take. You just wait here." And so they waited. Except Elisha. Elisha followed him. When they got to Jericho, a group, it says, of fifty of these students met Elijah; I guess they knew he was coming. They met Elijah, and Elisha was still with him, and they said to Elisha, "You know, we've heard that your master is soon to leave." And Elisha said, "Probably so. Just be quiet about it." And they followed him and they listened to his words, and he left Jericho. When he left Jericho, he said to them, "You stay here in Jericho. I've got a journey to take. You don't follow me." And so they stayed. Except Elisha. And Elisha kept following him. And at some point in the journey after leaving Jericho, Elijah turned around, and sure enough, there's Elisha right behind him. He turns to him and says, "I said, 'Stay here.'" And Elisha says to him, "As sure as God lives and I live, I will not leave you." And Elijah walked on. And Elisha walked on along behind him. And he walks on a little bit further, and Elijah turns around and there's Elisha still behind him, and he says to him, "I said, 'Wait here. Don't follow me.'" Elisha says, "As sure as God lives and as sure as I live, I will not leave you." Elijah walked on. He comes to the edge of the Jordan River, and he turns around. And who do you think is there behind him? Elisha. And he says, "OK, what do you want from me?" And Elisha just says to Elijah, "Give me a double portion of your spirit. Give me a double portion of your prophetic spirit, your relationship to God, the fire that burns within you." And Elijah says to him, "This is a hard thing that you have asked. It's a hard thing. Be prepared, but it's not mine to give. I can't promise you that, but I will tell you this: when I leave, if you see me leave, you will know that God has granted your request. If you do not see me leave, you will know that God has not granted your request." Elijah takes off—they call it his mantle in the Bible—it was like a robe. He takes it and he rolls it up, and he walks over to the River Jordan and he strikes the River Jordan, and the Jordan River parts. Sound familiar from another story? And they walk across on dry land, and then the river comes back together. As they were standing on the far side of the river, suddenly there appeared horses of fire and a chariot of fire, and it says that it passed between Elisha and Elijah, and Elisha saw Elijah caught up in the chariot, and he sees him leave. And he knows that his request has been granted.

After the horses and the chariot of fire with Elijah have gone, Elisha looks and sees that Elijah has dropped his mantle and it's lying on the ground. Elisha picks it up, and he walks

back to the Jordan River. He strikes the Jordan River. It parts. He walks across and begins his life as the chief prophet of the People of Israel.

This magnificent story has so many permutations of meaning, so many nuances, that there are a dozen sermons that could be taken from it. But looking at the grand scale of it, the over-arching part, you cannot help but notice that it is about one thing principally, and that one thing it is principally about is the transition of the prophetic office from Elijah to Elisha. It is the passing of the torch from one generation to the next. And this is not a passing that Elijah had not anticipated. It was not one that he was unprepared for. If you were here last Sunday, and you remember the scripture there, Elijah had gone into hiding on Mount Horeb in a cave, and God found him there. A series of things happen, and he hears God speaking to him in this very gentle, soft voice. He tells him, "Go back. There's work for you yet to do." And the work that he gives him to do is to anoint a few people kings over several different countries, and then also, to anoint Elisha, the son of Shapat of Abel-meholah, to be the new prophet for Israel, to pass on to Elisha the torch you're carrying, to give to him the responsibility for leadership among my people. Elijah knew when he left that cave that he was going in order to pass the torch on, to pass it to someone else.

George Washington, the Father of our Country, has been credited with an enormous number of things that he never did. But, sadly, he has not been given credit for what I personally think is the single most important thing he ever did. The most important thing he ever did was not winning the Revolutionary War. There was any number of generals who contributed as much as not more to that than he did. The most important thing he ever did was to leave office. Think about that. Here's a man who was so beloved at the end of that war they wanted to make him king. There was a movement to anoint him the King of America. He could have served until his death, but he served his term as president of this country and then quietly, peacefully, without a single shot fired, handed over the reins of authority to the next president. We've seen that happen so many times that it's common place to us, but you have to understand: that was a new thing in this world of ours. The European powers were stunned. They never dreamed it would happen because nobody in human history had ever willingly and voluntarily given up their authority over a nation. No one. When the power passed from one person to another, one generation to another, one authority to another, it passed with blood. Something new had happened. He gave the world a new way to govern and a new way to transit from one generation to another.

Too often in the church, as in so many endeavors that involve human beings, this transition is not so pleasant or peaceful. It is fraught with difficulty, pain, and often times, bloodshed. And it's anything but gracious. But it will come. The reins of authority and responsibility pass, and there's nothing we can do about it. It happens. If nothing else, it happens by death. Elijah knew that the responsibilities, the authority of the office of the priest of the people had to change. It was going to change, and he became instrumental in its change, not instrumental in resisting it. Note that Elijah passes that torch of leadership on not to just some yokel that happened to be passing by. He didn't wait until he died and said, "Let's see who comes to the top, who takes control." Instead, he chose someone that had

been chosen by God, someone who was prepared for the task. He had all those disciples back in Bethel. He could have passed it on to them, but he told them to stay, and they stayed. He had all of those fifty disciples in Jericho; he could have passed it to one of them, but he told them to stay, and they stayed. One man stayed with him, one man followed him, one man would not give up. One man was persistent and dedicated and deliberate. And one man asked for the favor of being given a double portion of his spirit, not for himself, not a double portion of his wealth, not a double portion of land, not a double portion of power, but of his spirit that he might be a good prophet for the people of Israel.

He chose Elisha carefully, as one he could see willing ready to make the sacrifices necessary, whose heart burned with a desire to serve God and to serve his people. We as the church have been entrusted with an incredibly precious jewel, and we should be very careful—not stingy—but very careful about passing that jewel on and to whom we pass it. As I said, Elisha was chosen long before this story, long before Elijah left and passed it on to him. One need not think that since Elijah knew that Elisha was chosen—one can imagine the conversations, the training, the teaching that Elijah must have done. This trip that I told you in a matter of six or seven minutes, this trip through Bethel to Jericho to the River Jordan, this is not like a quick automobile trip to Tyler and back. Think walking to Dallas and back. This is a trip that took days, weeks, maybe longer. You can imagine how Elijah must have talked with Elisha, preparing him for what was to come: the difficulties, the hardships, the joys, the responsibilities, the things that need to be done, the things that must be done. How he must have prepared him. It is important for us to be about the business of preparing those to take the responsibility and the leadership in the church tomorrow. How are we preparing for someone to take the reins of leadership in the future?

We heard Eleanor talking about our joy that we're having more and more young people come to be ordained. That didn't happen by accident. That happened because we made a decision about ten years ago that we had to begin to be intentional about seeking out young people for the ministry and training them and making them ready to take the responsibility for leadership in the church. How are we preparing for new leaders to take responsibility in this church? How are we looking, and training, and preparing, and how are we giving over to them those responsibilities that must be passed on?

I heard someone say a long time ago, "We must never forget—write this down; don't forget this now—we must never forget that every church in America, including this church, is one generation away from extinction." You miss one generation, and you're gone. There is no United Methodist Church in Athens. One generation. If our church wants to continue as a viable church, as a faithful church, as a church that continues to witness to the grace of God to this community, then we have a great and grave responsibility to train and prepare future generations to lead this church, and then to allow them to lead it. They will take it in different ways than we would have taken it. The message doesn't change, but the means by which we produce it, the means we communicate it do. Think about it. As I said, for a thousand years the Hebrew language was not written. The only way they had to tell the story of God was verbally. Then they began to write it. Then we began to print it. Now we

communicate it in a whole host of ways. The message of God's grace and God's love for His people is the same, but the means and methods we make that message appropriate to the world change. And we have to accept that.

As much as this story is the story of Elijah's choice of a successor, it is also a study of Elisha and his persistent and determined spirit that made him worthy as a successor to Elijah. He proved himself worthy by his unwillingness to waiver from the task at hand, his unwillingness to leave Elijah behind, his unwillingness to cease in his following. Elisha chose to follow him when he was discouraged by his peers who told him, "Hey, your master is getting ready to leave." When he was discouraged by Elijah himself, "Stay here. Wait here. Don't follow me." When he was dissuaded by the situations around him, he was unwavering in his desire to follow and to be the prophet.

This theme has parallels that carry over into Christian life and Christian literature. In the Gospel lesson for today, if I had chosen to preach from the Gospel lesson, the Gospel lesson is from the ninth chapter of Luke's Gospel where a man comes to Jesus and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." Now, if someone comes to us and says, "I want to be a member of your church," we feel great. "Wonderful, come on down. It's real easy." Jesus says to the man, "Think about this. Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests. I don't have any place to sleep. You going to follow me there? No home? No kin?" Another man comes to him and says, "Lord, I will follow you, but let me go and bury my father first." A reasonable request. Jesus says to him, "You let the dead bury the dead. If you want to follow me, you come follow me now." And another man comes and offers to follow him, and Jesus says to him and to all who would hear, "Anyone who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is not worthy of the Kingdom of God. When you make the decision to step on this road and follow me, if you look back and think, 'Gee, I'm not sure that was a good idea. I don't know. This seems kind of tough and uphill a lot,' you're not worthy of the Kingdom of God. God chooses those for leadership who have a fire that burns within them that is unique, that is consuming, that is encompassing, all encompassing.

A number of years ago a movie came out called "Chariots of Fire." It was about a young English boy who had within him a fire for running. He loved to run. From his earliest memory he loved to run, and he loved to run in competition. He ran and he ran and he ran, and he became so good at it that in 1920 something or other, he qualified for the Olympics. And then he went on and he qualified for the finals in the 100-meter run. But the final race for the 100-meter run, the chance to take the gold, the chance for this man whose life was consumed by running, to run the greatest race of his life, was going to be held on a Sunday, and so he withdrew. His coaches were so angry they called the Prince of Wales who was to be the future King of England, he was going to be this man's King, and he comes to him and orders him to run. And still he refused. He refused because as much as there was in his heart a fire for running, there was in his heart a greater fire for serving God. And that fire consumed him so he could not imagine denying it. What the movie doesn't tell you—it's a true story, by the way—is that this young man, this fire within him, went on to burn and to guide him to become a Christian missionary in China where he was killed as a martyr.

The most notable aspect of this story about Elijah and Elisha is what they had in common. And what they had in common is something they shared with that Olympic runner, and it was the fire of God's spirit that burned in their hearts and in their souls. We have a fire, a torch to pass on, but you can't pass on a fire to the next generation if you haven't caught it yourself or if you have let the pains and the politics and the business of the church stamp that fire out in you. You've got to have that fire in you first. As I heard another preacher say once, "You can no more pass on what you haven't got than you can come back from someplace you've never been." The greatest lesson that we can learn from this story is the need to have the fire of God's spirit within us, burning within us as individuals and burning within our church. It was that fire, not their prophetic powers, it was that fire that made Elijah and Elisha so special. It can make you special too. And one day put you on your own chariot of fire, leaving that fire behind burning in the lives of those, I pray, will have a double portion of our spirit.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen