

This is the second sermon on the story of Elijah being taken up into heaven. In the first sermon we considered the parallels between Moses/Joshua, Elijah/Elisha and John the Baptist/Jesus. There is no question that God intends for us to see these parallels and to interpret these pairs in the light of one another. We saw that this is something that is very common in the Bible. There is an interconnectedness between the earlier and later parts of the Scriptures and there is no question that it was God's intention to tie the Bible together in that way. And this is one of the reasons that the OT is still relevant to us today. The Old Testament helps us to understand the NT and the NT helps us to connect the OT to our own lives which are very different from the lives of the OT people of God.

There are three aspects of the story told in 2 Kings 2:1-14 that we will consider this evening. We will look at Elisha's request of a double portion of Elijah's spirit. We will look at the significance of the fact that Elisha referred to Elijah as "The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And we will consider the significance of the fact that Elijah was taken into heaven.

So first Elisha asks Elijah for a double portion of his spirit. Verses 9-10, "When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.' And Elisha said, 'Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.' And he said, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so.'" Elisha does see Elijah as he is taken from him. And the sign that he had indeed received the double portion of Elijah's spirit is that he receives Elijah's cloak, is able to part the water of the Jordan and pass over on dry ground. Verse 15 tells us that the sons of the prophets recognized this for they say in verse 15, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

Now first of all we must understand that all of this is referring to the Spirit of God. Elijah was a great man of God because God was working through him by his Spirit. God's servants are always equipped for their work by God's Spirit. Elijah in his own strength had nothing to pass on to Elisha. The subject here is the Spirit of God who equips God's servants for their ministries.

Secondly, we must not think that Elisha asked for and received twice as much of God's Spirit as Elijah had had. Elisha was not wanting to be greater than Elijah had been. The people of God are not to aspire to personal greatness, and they are certainly not to want more of God's Spirit than others so that they can outshine them. That is decidedly not what God's kingdom is about. Elisha turned out to be a faithful servant of God, and part of what that means is that he did not aspire to personal greatness. In order to understand what Elisha was asking for when he asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit we must understand the background to the term "double portion." A "double portion" was what the firstborn son received of the inheritance at the death of his father. And along with that double portion came the responsibility of being the head of the household. The double portion equipped the firstborn son to take the lead in the family.

And that is why Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Elisha had been chosen by God to be Elijah's successor. It was his task to take the lead among the prophets. And for that task he would need God's Spirit to equip him. Elisha was simply asking for the same Spirit who had empowered Elijah to empower him to enable him to perform the task that God had called him to.

The point is that God's servants depend on God's Spirit in order to be effective in anything that has to do with God's kingdom. There is a sense in which we can do nothing at all without God's strength because our life and our strength and our giftedness all come from God. But that is true of every single human being whether they are followers of God or not. But on top of that believers need a special empowerment from the Spirit of God for anything having to do with serving God's kingdom. We see that in the OT in that prophets, priests and kings who served the Lord were anointed by God's spirit to equip them for their task. So that is what is going on here when Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

Now we have already seen the connection between Elijah/Elisha and John the Baptist/ Jesus. It is very significant that John the Baptist had a role to play in Jesus receiving the Holy Spirit to equip him for his mission for God's kingdom. When Jesus met up with John the Baptist, he asked to be baptized. And it was while Jesus was being baptized that the "heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him...." (Matthew 3:16)

Even though he was God, Jesus needed the Holy Spirit to equip him in his human nature for the task that God was calling him to perform. The Holy Spirit played a significant role in Jesus' ministry. The Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted. One of the key prophecies that Jesus fulfilled is quoted in Matthew 12:18, "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles."

So it is very interesting to see this parallel between Elijah/Elisha and John the Baptist/ Jesus in connection with the receiving of the Spirit of God. Jesus did what he did for our salvation equipped by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was sent by the Father, voluntarily embraced his calling to be our Saviour and was equipped by the Holy Spirit. All three of the members of the Trinity were involved in our salvation.

But there is one more parallel that brings this subject closer to home. Elisha was to continue Elijah's ministry. Jesus continued John the Baptist's ministry. And who continues Jesus' ministry? It is the church. And that is the significance of Pentecost. Elijah was taken up into heaven and Elisha received the double portion of his spirit. Jesus ascended into heaven and from there he poured out his Spirit upon the church so that the church could continue Jesus' ministry in all kinds of ways. One of the aspects of Jesus' ministry that the church continues is his prophetic ministry. On the day of Pentecost Peter quoted from the prophecy of Joel, part of which said, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...." (Acts 2:17)

The church is a continuation of Jesus' prophetic ministry – first by the apostles giving us the NT, but then as the ones who would declare Jesus' word in Scripture to the whole world. Jesus send the church into all the world with the gospel. Jesus taught that his disciples were the light of the world. Paul would later call the church the "pillar and buttress of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:15) So the sequence now is Elijah/Elisha – John the Baptist/Jesus and Jesus and the church. The church is the continuation of Jesus' mission and for that task we are equipped by the Holy Spirit.

And the purpose of all that is to proclaim God's message to both the church and the world. Certainly the church is equipped by the Spirit to proclaim God's message to itself. Think of the NT teaching of the gifts of the

Spirit. They include pastors and teachers and the gifts of teaching and exhortation. But the Holy Spirit also equips the church to proclaim God's message to the world. That is one of the differences between the OT period and the NT period. The OT prophets were sent mostly to bring God's word to Israel. The NT church is sent by Jesus into all the world with the gospel. And the Holy Spirit is the one who equips the church to do that. That is a huge part of the meaning of Pentecost and the message of the book of Acts.

So this is what we are equipped to do as the church of Jesus Christ. Just as Elisha was equipped by a double portion of Elijah's spirit and Jesus was equipped by the Holy Spirit, so Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to equip the church for the prophetic task that he has given her – the task to proclaim the word of God both to the church and to the world.

Together as members of Christ's church we have a prophetic calling – to bring God's word to the church and the world. This is the means by which God is advancing his kingdom in the world. That is what he was doing through Elisha. That he what he was doing through Jesus. And that is what he is doing through the church. And in each case the Holy Spirit is the one who equips us for the task.

And that involves every one of us. We all share in the prophetic calling of the church. We all share in the equipping for that calling by the Holy Spirit. This is the significance of the gifts of the Spirit that the Bible insists that each believer receives. Listen to how Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

This is a most encouraging subject. We are all equipped by the Holy Spirit for contribute to the mission of the church and that includes the mission of declaring the word of the Lord. But we are not all equipped in the same way. There are a great variety of gifts. And all the gifts are to be used to contribute to the church's fulfillment of its mission to proclaim the word of God. We do it by maintaining the preaching and teaching ministry of the church. We do it by going into nursing homes with God's message. We do it by speaking to unbelievers that we meet in the activities of our lives. We do it by supporting church planting and missionaries. The church as a whole has received the prophetic ministry and the Spirit enables us in that ministry by the variety of gifts that he has given to the church.

And so it remains for us to ask ourselves what gift has the Spirit given us and how are we using that gift to contribute to the church's mission. With the gift comes the calling. The gifting of the Holy Spirit is an encouragement which is at the same time a calling. Elisha was equipped and called to bring God's word to his people. We, the church, are equipped and called to bring God's word both to the church and to the world. And we are all equipped and called in one way or another to contribute to the prophetic mission of the church.

But there is another great encouragement for us in this from the story of Elijah being taken up into heaven. It has to do with what Elisha called Elijah as Elijah was being taken up. Verses 11-12 "And as they still went on and talked, bold chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elisha saw it and he cried, 'My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' And he saw him no more."

Elisha called Elijah, “The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” This way of referring to Elijah is extremely significant. The reference to chariots and horsemen has to do with warfare. In the earlier history of Israel the kingdom of God advanced through literal warfare led first by Joshua in the conquest of the promised land and later led by the kings of Israel. By referring to Elijah as “The chariots of Israel and its horsemen,” Elisha was recognizing that God’s kingdom would now advance by the power of the prophetic word. By referring to Elijah as “The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” Elisha was recognizing that with Elijah a shift had taken place in God’s warfare against the forces of idolatry and evil. Instead of kings leading literal armies against Israel’s enemies, God’s conquest of sin and evil would now proceed by the weapon of the prophetic word. There is still warfare going on, but it is no longer literal fighting as it was in the early part of Israel’s history. The latter part of the OT and the NT are dominated by the prophetic word – the word of God.

That language of warfare remains. But the great weapon from God’s side now is the prophetic word – the word of God. Listen to how Paul speaks about his ministry in 2 Corinthians 10:3-4, “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ....”

Now just because the weapons have changed from literal swords to the sword of the word of God does not mean that the warfare is less serious. The warfare between God’s kingdom and the kingdom of evil is still a matter of life and death. Warfare is always a matter of life and death. Spiritual life and spiritual death are no less serious than physical life and death. We are in a battle and what is at stake in the battle could not be more monumental. The issue that is at stake is eternal life and eternal death and there is nothing more serious than that. Indeed one of the themes of the book of Revelation especially is that for a Christian to be killed for his faith is actually victory. Physical death for a Christian is not the ultimate disaster, but the way in which he enters into the presence of God.

But we are in a war. In Ephesians 6:12 Paul writes, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” And Paul continues in this passage speaking about the armor of God which includes both defensive protection and offensive weapons and they are all related to the gospel and the word of God: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

It is also significant that Jesus, in the book of Revelation is described having a sword coming out of his mouth. The idea is that he conquers with his word. Revelation 19:14-15, “And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him [Jesus] on white horses. And from his mouth comes a sharp sword, with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.”

So when Elisha calls Elijah, “The chariots of Israel and its horsemen,” he is making the point that the great and powerful weapon in God’s battle against the forces of evil in the world is the prophetic word, which in our time, as we have seen, is wielded by the church equipped by the Spirit of Christ. I remind you of the way the victory of the church is expressed in Revelation 12:11, “And they have conquered him [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”

We live in a world in which the word of God is despised. It is treated as inconsequential. But it is one of the ways that God exercises his power in the world. And so we, the church, as the proclaimers of the prophetic word are the “The chariots of Israel and its horsemen.” There is nothing in all the world that can stand against the power of the word of God. Jesus strikes down the nations with the sharp sword that comes from his mouth – which is his powerful word.

That word is always a word of salvation and a word of judgment. In Romans 1, Paul says of the gospel, “[I]t is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes....” The kingdom of God advances in the world as the powerful gospel brings dead sinners to life and transforms them into the image of Christ. But the word of God is also powerful in judgment. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2:15, “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.” In Romans 9:18 Paul writes, “So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”

And at the end of the age all that is evil will be destroyed by the power of the word of Christ. In 2 Thessalonians 2:8 Paul writes that “the Lord Jesus will kill [the lawless one] with the breath of his mouth.”

This is a great encouragement for us as we think of the battle that is raging in this world between God and his followers and Satan and his followers. God works in the world and his kingdom comes by the power of his word. The word of God brings the dead to life and the word of God is the power by which the enemies of God are defeated. And the church is the proclaimer of that word. And as such we are the “chariots of Israel and its horsemen!”

Finally we consider the fact that Elijah was taken up into heaven. 2 Kings 2:11, “And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.” This is very interesting. Elijah did not die. Elijah was taken directly into heaven. This happened to one other person in the OT and that was Enoch. Genesis 5:24 says, “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.”

Now in the light of the NT teaching of the ascension of Jesus, it may not seem too surprising that these two OT saints were taken directly into heaven. But the hope of life beyond the grave is not real clear in the OT. There are passages which express a hope that death is not the end, but there are also passage which speak of death as the end. For instance in 2 Samuel 14:13 we read, “We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again.” In Job 16:22 Job says, “For when a few years have come I shall go the way from which I shall not return.”

But alongside of these are a few passages which speak of hope beyond the grave and this story of Elijah being taken up into heaven is one of them. Just think of the original readers of this story pondering what it might mean. It is an instance of someone who did not die. It is an instance of a godly prophet being taken directly into heaven. It was a hint that there was another possibility besides death being the final word. It is one of the OT hints of hope of life in the presence of God beyond this earthly life.

Of course, that hope becomes clear and bright in the NT with the resurrection and ascension of Christ. This story of Elijah being taken into heaven is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ defeat of death through his death and

resurrection and then his ascension into heaven. We are in a much better place than the saints of the OT who had some inkling, but not the confident hope that we can have based on Jesus' victory over death.

Instead we can be encouraged in the face of death, by words such as 1 Thessalonians 4:16, "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first." In Revelation 1:17, 18 Jesus says, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." And Revelation 21:4 "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more...."

The OT saints after Elijah could ponder Elijah being taken directly into heaven and it was part of a vague hope that death would not be the end for God's people. We can face death with the confidence of the NT revelation concerning Jesus and the victory he has won by his life, death and resurrection. The NT assures believers that we have both died with him and have risen with him and the resurrection life that is in us will one day result in our being raised from the dead to live with Christ in the new heavens and the new earth forever.

Death is an awful thing. It is the result of sin. But the story of the Bible is about how God has overcome death in Jesus Christ. And so we who believe no longer face death as the end – as the final state. The final state for believers is life – eternal life – resurrected life – the fullness of life.

That is what Jesus accomplished for us by his life, death and resurrection. It is the greatest possible accomplishment in the history of the world, and it is a marvelous display of love and grace and mercy. What a wonder it is that we who deserve death can live with the confident hope that we will live forever in the presence of God! And what a reason then for us to respond to such love with love and thanksgiving in return!

Now blessed we are! And it is all because God is so wonderfully good and loving and generous. As Psalm 31:19 says, "Oh how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you...." What reason then do we have to give ourselves wholly to living for him!