

This morning we hear the word of the Lord from the story in which Elijah is taken into heaven. It is a strange story, full of things that do not seem to make sense. But it is also a story of extraordinary importance in the Scriptures. We will see some of that importance as we move through it and consider its message. Because there is so much in this passage to consider I will be preaching two sermons on this passage.

We are told right at the beginning that the LORD was going to take Elijah to heaven by a whirlwind. This reminds us that in the Bible miracles are fairly common. The God whom the Bible reveals is a God who can do whatever he pleases and in certain situation he is pleased to do miracles.

This is an important difference between Christianity and the common worldview that excludes anything beyond the physical material world. According to that worldview miracles can't happen, and the miracles of the Bible can only be interpreted as fanciful stories that could never happen in reality. But we must remember that looking at the world in that way is a belief system. It is a belief system that denies the existence of anything beyond the physical material world. But it cannot be proven that there is nothing beyond the physical material world. That is why it is a belief system. It is based ultimately on beliefs that cannot be proven.

The biblical world-view is also a belief system. We can't prove that the biblical worldview is true, but we can show that it does the best job by far of explaining the world as we experience it. And in the biblical world-view miracles are not a problem because at the heart of the biblical world-view is the true God who is infinite in power and glory, who can do whatever he wants to do and who at various times in the biblical story has chosen to do miracles. As Psalm 78:14 sings of God, "You are the God who works wonders."

So this is the story in which Elijah is taken into heaven. This is a particularly significant miracle, but we will get to that next week. First we have some rather strange behaviour by Elijah. He and Elisha are walking together when Elijah says to Elisha, "Please stay here, for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." And Elisha responds, "But as the LORD lives, and as you yourself live. I will not leave you."

A similar interaction happens two more times. Elijah tells Elisha that the LORD has sent him to another town, tells him to stay put and each time Elisha refuses and insists that he will not leave Elijah. This is a very odd dialog to say the least. Why would Elijah ask Elisha to let him go on alone and why would Elisha insist each time that he would not leave Elijah?

The most likely explanation is that it was some kind of test for Elisha. As it turns out it was important for Elisha to be with Elijah when he was taken up into heaven. Good things happened because Elisha persisted and stayed with Elijah right to the end. He received the double blessing that he asked for. He was left Elijah's cloak that confirmed that he was to be Elijah's successor. The unfolding of the story shows that Elisha being with Elijah right to the end was important for the whole process of succession. And so the most likely reason for

Elijah discouraging Elisha from being with him at the end was that God through Elijah was testing Elisha. God had called Elisha to follow Elijah and Elisha had to continue following Elijah right to the very end.

The Bible reveals God as a God who tests his people. The most dramatic instance of that is the story in which God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. That also was a very strange request. And it is a very strange story. And yet it is an important story in the story that the Bible tells and one of its lessons is that God does test his people in various ways for various reasons. James 1:2-3 says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."

So this testing of Elisha is a reminder to us that God does test his people from time to time. Testing is the experience of some difficulty or some puzzling situation to see what we will do. But the intention is always that we will be strengthened by the test. We need to be alert to this when we consider the circumstances in our lives. In a way we are always being tested because we are always being faced with temptations and trials and there is always a wrong way or a right way to go. We must realize that God often tests us as part of his way of strengthening us. And it will be helpful for us to remember this fact when we are faced with situations that are hard or even puzzling. We must ask ourselves whether it is a test and what is required to pass the test.

In this case Elisha passed the test by sticking with Elijah right to the end and as it turned out being there right at the end was the way in which Elisha was unmistakably qualified to be Elijah's successor.

There is something else in these first verses of this section that we need to consider. It is the strange journey that Elijah took to get to the place where he was taken up into heaven. The story begins with Elijah and Elisha on the way from Gilgal. Then Elijah says that the LORD had sent him to Bethel. Then the LORD sends him to Jericho. Then the LORD sends him to the Jordan. Then Elijah rolls up his cloak, strikes the water of the Jordan river and the river opens up and Elijah and Elisha pass through it on dry ground.

This last bit is the more obvious clue to the significance of this rather stranger journey. Clearly it has something to do with Israel entering the land of Canaan through the same Jordan river many years before Elijah's time. At that time Joshua was the leader of the people and he led the people through the same Jordan river at about the same place also on dry ground. Another hint that God wants us to think of the journey of Elijah and Elisha in the light of the entry of Joshua and Israel into the land of Canaan is that Jericho is one of the first cities that Israel encounters when they enter the promised land. All of the stops on the itinerary described in this story are associated with Israel's arrival in the land.

Elijah and Elisha are retracing the steps that Joshua and Israel took when they entered the land. And then after Elijah is taken into heaven, Elisha takes the cloak of Elijah, strikes the water of the Jordan, the water parts and Elisha cross over back into the promised land. And then first place where Elisha goes is Jericho. So

clearly what is going on here is designed to associate Elijah and Elisha with Joshua and the people of Israel entering the land of Canaan and beginning the conquest of the land.

Now this sort of thing happens quite a bit in Scripture. Actually it happens a lot. Let me give you one example from the life of Jesus. There is the well-known story from Jesus' young life in which Herod tried to kill him by having all the boys under the age of two murdered because Herod had heard about the birth of a king. Because of that threat to Jesus' life, an angel appears to Joseph and tells him to take Jesus and Mary and flee to Egypt. And we read in Matthew 2:15, "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" The author, who is ultimately God, wants us to think of Jesus being in Egypt and later travelling from Egypt back to the promised land in the light of Israel coming out of Egypt and going to the promised land. This helps us to understand the significance of Jesus as the one who would be the new Israel – the one who would symbolically relive Israel's history and succeed where Israel had failed.

Well the same sort of thing is going on in our text where the movements of Elijah and Elisha retrace a significant part of Israel's history. And the purpose is that we are to think of the two historical moments together so that we have a deeper understanding of the significance of Elijah and Elisha within the bigger picture of God's plan for Israel and for the salvation of the world.

At its most basic, these parallels in Scripture impress us with the fact that God is guiding this history. The fact that God tells Elijah to go these cities and then cross the Jordan by means of the same miracle by which Joshua and Israel entered the land and the fact that Elisha re-enters the land by the same miracle again makes it very clear that God is guiding the events as they unfold. The history of salvation is not random. It is directed by God and he has embedded certain patterns in that history that help us to understand it. But at the very basic level we see how God is guiding that history and controlling it very specifically both to achieve certain purposes, but also to illuminate what those purposes are.

So we have the transition from Elijah to Elisha following the pattern of the transition from Moses to Joshua together with Joshua and Israel's entry into the promised land. But that still leaves us with the question of what God is telling us by this parallel. Paul House in his commentary on this passage gives a helpful answer to this question. "Such a scenario calls attention to the similarities of Elisha's succession of Elijah and Joshua's succession of Moses.... Therefore, the text stresses the continuity of God's message and God's messengers in Israel's history and places Elijah on a par with Moses." (House p, 257)

Now imagine this story being pondered by the people of Israel long into the future. They are looking back on their history. It has been a steady decline since the time of David and Solomon. The decline has led to the people of Israel being expelled from the promised land. They remained a people, but they were never again a free and sovereign nation. Think of this story from their perspective.

First there is Elijah and Elisha retracing the steps of the conquest through the Jordan and outside of the promised land. And then Elijah is taken into heaven. The great question they would be wondering is had God given up on Israel. The question they would ask would be the same question that Elisha asked in verse 14 of our text. Elijah had disappeared. His cloak lay on the ground and Elisha asked, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah." That question is answered powerfully in what happens next. "And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over." And verse 15, "Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them, they said, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.'"

The connection with Moses' death and Joshua's succession and the entry of Joshua and Israel into the land makes the very powerful point that the meaning of Joshua's ministry and the meaning of Elisha's ministry were one and the same. Through Elisha, God was at work pursuing his goal of defeating the idols in the land and establishing it as the place where God would dwell with his people. The situation on the ground was very different. When Joshua and Israel first entered the promised land, they were fighting against the various Canaanite peoples who were under God's judgment because of their idolatry. Elisha's ministry would take place in a situation in which the majority of the people of Israel had succumbed to the worship of idols. But the parallel between Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha conveyed the powerful message that God had not given up his plan for a kingdom of faithful subjects that would be a light for the rest of the world. Elisha parting the water and re-entering the promised land was the continuation of God's purpose to defeat the idol worshippers and to pursue his goal of a kingdom of faithful worshippers.

Now this same kind of connection is made in the Bible between Elijah and Elisha and John the Baptist and Jesus. When the angel tells Zechariah that John the Baptist is going to be born he associates him with Elijah. Luke 1:16-17, "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and the power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." John the Baptist dresses like Elijah. Like Elijah he is a loner. He lives in the wilderness. He baptizes people in the Jordan river. Jesus is baptized in the Jordan river and there the Holy Spirit descends upon him.

Jesus' ministry has similarities with that of Elisha. He is surrounded by disciples unlike Elijah and John the Baptist. Both Elisha and Jesus perform many miracles. Many of Jesus' miracles were similar to Elisha's miracles. John the Baptist and Jesus are to be understood in the light of both Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha. All three pairs are God's instruments to conquer idols and bring God's people into the promised land where they will serve God and dwell with him forever. We are to understand the ministry of Jesus as a continuation and an escalation of what God was doing through Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha. All of them had to do with the defeat of God's enemies and the salvation of his people and his purpose of establishing his kingdom.

Basically, what this does is to help us to see the depth and the interconnectedness of the biblical story. It gives us a sense of God's commitment to his people and to his plan for the overthrow of the curse of sin. It demonstrates to us the steadfast love of God that he continues to send his servants generation after generation to bring his word and to battle against the enemies of all that is right and good and God-honoring. It also helps us to understand more deeply the significance and ministry of Jesus as the one who completed what all who were before him only partially completed. Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha led God's people in the fight against sin and idolatry and sought to establish God's kingdom. Their ministries were significant, but nothing fundamental changed through them.

That is very different with Jesus. Even though God's kingdom has not yet fully come, what Jesus accomplished far exceeded what Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha accomplished. It is significant that they were all fighting the same battle. The goals of each of their ministries was essentially the same. But Jesus is the one who could finally say on the cross – "It is finished." Something monumental was finished when Jesus died on the cross. Finally the power of sin had been broken. That is why Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus defeated sin and death and thus also the devil. It was the same battle that Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha were engaged in, but Jesus did something that no one else could do. He broke the power of sin. He paid the penalty for sin and in so doing he guaranteed the final and complete victory over sin and death.

Now I want to take the time now to apply as much of this story as we have covered. We will consider the rest of it next week. There are quite a few take-aways from what we have considered so far from this passage.

This interconnectedness of the Scriptures is important. And it highlights the importance of knowing the Scriptures. By causing the Scriptures to be written in this way with these connections between earlier stories and later stories God is showing that he expects his people to be familiar with the Scriptures. God expects the people reading this passage to make the connection between Elijah-Elisha and Moses/Joshua and John the Baptist/Jesus. God expects us to understand the significance of Jesus in the light of Moses/Joshua and Elijah/Elisha.

That is not to say that we all have to be Bible scholars in order to understand the gospel. The basics of what we need to know are relatively simple so that the good news of the gospel can be conveyed in a conversation or a pamphlet. Thank God that we do not need to be Biblical scholars in order to profit from the Bible. However, God does not expect his people to remain at the entry level of their knowledge of him and his word. Furthermore, his way of saving his people is often through covenant children being raised to be followers of God and that means being immersed in the Scriptures from a very young age. The interconnectedness that we see in this passage with other parts of Scripture teaches us that God expects his people to grow in their knowledge of the Scriptures so that they can discern the interconnectedness of the Scriptures and grow in their knowledge of God and his mission and their part in it.

This expectation is made explicit in Hebrews 5:11-6:1 where the author of that letter says, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk not solid food.” In 6:1 he says, “Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go onto maturity.” Clearly God expects us to grow in our knowledge of his word.

This is particularly important for our knowledge of Christ. Remember what Jesus said to the two disciples he met on the road to Emmaus after he had risen from the dead. Luke 24:25, “And he said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!’” Verse 27, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

This association of Moses/Joshua, Elijah/Elisha and John the Baptist and Jesus helps us to understand the significance of Jesus and his mission. If we narrow our focus to the idea of Elisha crossing through the Jordan on dry land and how that connects his ministry to the conquest of Canaan, it shows us that the conquest of Canaan is an important paradigm for understanding the ministry of Jesus. Israel was promised the land of Canaan and God enabled her to take the land by defeating the idol worshippers living there. Elisha’s ministry must be understood in the light of the conquest. By his time Israel had largely succumbed to the temptation to worship idols and Elisha was re-entering the land to do battle with the worshippers of idols and strengthen and nurture the faithful. Jesus’ ministry must be seen in the light of that paradigm.

Jesus’ ministry was also a conquest – the conquest of the root cause of idolatry and sin. One of Jesus’ main themes in his teaching was the coming of God’s kingdom in him. Jesus did many miracles as Elisha had done. The miracles pointed to Jesus conquest over sin and its results. Jesus’ ministry included the defeat of Satan and his demons. In Matthew 12:27 he said, “If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Jesus’ ministry is the fulfillment of the conquest of Canaan. It is the conquest of sin and evil and it involves providing an inheritance for the people of God. The land of Canaan was Israel’s inheritance. Jesus said in Matthew 5:5 “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” At the end of the age Jesus will say to those on his right hand, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matthew 25:34)

What I want to highlight about this is how the connections that we see in the Bible are intended to lead us to look at the message of the Bible as a whole. The connections are God’s doing and so it is God who is telling us to think of Elijah/Elisha in the light of Moses/Joshua and John the Baptist and Jesus in the light of Moses/Joshua and Elijah/Elisha. These connections tie the story of the Bible together. They alert us to the fact that God intends for us to understand the Bible as a whole and to understand Jesus in the light of all kinds of OT people and themes. God is telling us to understand the world and our own lives in the light of the entire sweep of the biblical story.

What this means is that the Bible in the first place is not about us and our salvation. It is in the first place about God and what he has done and is doing through Jesus Christ. Our salvation fits into that larger story, but it is the larger story that is the focus and it is that larger story which is to be the focus of our lives.

In the case of what we have focused on this morning, the overarching paradigm is the conquest of Canaan which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is about God's plan to have a people who worship him and live together with him in a special place. It is about how Jesus did what Israel failed to do and won the victory over sin and evil and Satan and secured our inheritance for us.

We are called to live in the light of that story. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." God's kingdom is the priority. God takes care of us and that frees us to seek the kingdom first of all. We are not to be anxious because God promises to provide for us in every way and we are free to focus on what really matters, the kingdom of God.

The ultimate way that God provides for us is the salvation that Jesus accomplished for us. We are not only not to be anxious about food and drink and clothing. We are not to be anxious about our acceptance with God if we are trusting in Jesus. We are assured in Romans 8 that nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ. We are told in Philippians 4 that we are to rejoice in the Lord even though we are far from perfect in our lives. That can only be because we live in God's love and favor for Jesus sake.

Because of this we can focus on the big picture as the Bible directs us to do also by this interconnectedness that we have looked at this morning. If we are secure in God's favor because of Christ, we can stop obsessing about ourselves and look outside of ourselves to what God is up to in the world and how we are called to participate in that.

A huge part of the Christian life is about living in the light of something much greater than ourselves. What we have looked at this morning is one of the ways that the Bible makes that point.