

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

FEBRUARY 17, 2008



For more sermons go to www.wrconchurch.org

1 Kings 19-2 Kings 10 "The Successor"

Elijah was considered the greatest of the prophets, confronting kings and queens and the prophets of Baal. But his successor, Elisha, was notable in very different ways. If Elijah confronted, Elisha healed; in the eyes of some scholars, Elisha was a Jesus-figure to Elijah's "John the Baptist" (Leithart).

1) Chariots of Fire

But first the "torch must be passed" to the new generation of prophets: Elijah comes to the young man who is plowing fields and puts his cloak around Elisha's shoulders. It is Elisha's "anointing" - the mantle of the old prophet placed on the young one. Elisha hesitates long enough to say good-bye to his family, but shows his faith that this is God's call by sacrificing his oxen on a fire made with his plow and yoke. From this moment on he will follow Elijah, and become his apprentice.

Years go by before "the LORD is ready to take Elijah up into heaven;" and Elisha develops fierce devotion and loyalty to his master. When Elijah sets out on his last journey from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River, Elisha insists he will not leave him - even when other prophets emerge to ask him "Do you not know that today the LORD will take your master?" "Yes, I know it," says Elisha. So the two men come to the river, and Elijah smites the waters with his cloak, and the waters divide, and they cross

over on dry ground. "What can I do for you?" asks Elijah. "Give me a double share of your spirit," says Elisha.

Suddenly a mighty whirlwind, and a chariot and horses of fire separate the two men, and Elijah is taken up into the glory of the LORD. Elisha cries out, and then accepting that his master has gone, he picks up Elijah's cloak and returns to the river. Is the LORD now with him? He smites the waters, and they divide for him, and he returns to Israel as the new "man of God."

It's a dramatic tale, which gave rise to the story that because Elijah had not died but had been taken straight into heaven, he would one day *return*. So the very last words of the Old Testament, in Malachi 4, speak of Elijah returning before the great "Day of the LORD." And the Gospels begin with stories of John the Baptist, the man Jesus affirms is "the new Elijah."

The phrase "chariot of fire" - as you probably know - has passed into modern culture; from Elijah via the poet William Blake and his 1804 poem called "*Jerusalem*." (*And did those feet in ancient time/Walk upon England's mountains green/And was the holy Lamb of God/On England's pleasant pastures seen!*). Set to Parry's music and Elgar's orchestration, "*Jerusalem*" became England's unofficial "second national anthem." The third verse says: *Bring me my bow of burning*

gold/Bring me my arrows of desire/Bring me my spear, O clouds unfold/Bring me my chariot of fire! That of course was the sentiment behind the title of the 1980s movie *Chariots of Fire*, which told the stories of two English sprinters preparing for the 1924 Olympic Games. But enough of these British-isms!

2) *The Miracle Worker*

Now Elisha is the prophet of God in Israel. His story is long, and full of miracles. He makes poisoned water sweet, he makes a jar of oil multiply until its widowed owner can sell enough oil to pay her debts and relieve her sons from debt-slavery. He saves one school of prophets from a poisoned stew, and another group from starvation by multiplying loaves of bread so they can “eat and have some left over.”

When he is offered a room built onto the house-top of a wealthy woman, he accepts with delight, and offers to help her in return. His servant says “she needs a child,” and the prophet amazes the woman, saying that within a year she will give birth. But her joy turns to anguish when her son dies. By now Elisha is on a trip to Mt. Carmel, and the mother travels miles to ask him for help. Elisha returns, they “pray to the LORD,” and he raises the boy to life again!

Perhaps the most famous of his miracles, which Jesus quotes to illustrate God’s work among the Gentiles, is the healing of Naaman, commander of the Syrian army. He has leprosy; and after years of suffering, is told by his wife’s servant that “there is a man of God in Israel” whom he should see. With the blessings of his king, Naaman sets out with an entourage and gifts of gold and silver and clothing to find Elisha. Of course the prophet has no interest in gifts. He simply tells Naaman that if he will go and immerse himself seven times in the Jordan, he will be cured.

Naaman is a proud man; he is quickly offended, and turns away in anger, muttering that there are rivers in Syria he could bathe in! But his servants remind him that he would have done anything the prophet demanded to be cured; why not this simple thing? Naaman is humbled, goes down into the river, and emerges with “flesh clean like that of a young boy.” He understands, and turns to Elisha and declares “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.” It is a classic conversion story – a proud but needy man believes the prophet’s word and obeys; is healed and finds faith in the true God. Jesus said Naaman shows how God sometimes has to bring complete “outsiders” to faith when the “insiders” are unfaithful.

Elisha is healing and restoring Israel from the terrible spiritual damage done by the house of Ahab. He is comforting and feeding and building up the believing remnant of the LORD’s people in Israel. His ministry is as vital as Elijah’s confrontational one; as his successor, he is called to something quite different – a time of healing and restoring those who are willing to be healed and restored. Elisha’s miraculous acts are a “sign of the Kingdom of God,” just as Jesus’ miracles would be 850 years later. And you do not have to wonder why some 1st Century Jews thought Jesus was “Elijah, or one of the prophets come again.”

3) *Prophecies of Doom*

But Elisha, like Jesus, was called to more than healing. The prophet had also to speak the “word of the LORD” to kings and generals. And here he has unfinished business to conduct for his master Elijah. On Mt. Sinai, the LORD had given him three tasks to perform – to anoint Elisha as his successor: done! – and to anoint new kings for Israel and for Syria: not yet done!

So it falls to Elisha, the miracle-worker and healer, to confront the current kings. By now Ahab's son Joram is king of Israel, and he is a little better than his father. But his mother Jezebel still lives, a continuing malign influence behind the throne. When war again breaks out between Israel and Syria, Elisha agrees to counsel Joram. The Syrians send out a war party to capture Elisha; when his servant rises one morning, he sees their town surrounded by Syrian chariots! Elisha prays "O LORD, open his eyes that he may see... those who are with us are more than those who are with them!" And when the servant looks, "he sees the hills full of horses and chariots of fire" protecting him and Elisha. But the war with Syria continues, the city of Samaria is besieged, and the famine is so bad that people resort to cannibalism, which Joram decides to blame on Elisha.

So now Elisha does what no prophet had done before: he goes himself to Damascus to confront the Syrian king Ben-Hadad, who is sick and afraid he will die. Elisha takes aside the court officer Hazael, and says the word of the LORD is that Ben-Hadad will die, and Hazael will become king. That night Hazael suffocates Ben-Hadad. Far from celebrating, Elisha can only weep. He knows that the word of the LORD is true, but he grieves because he sees already what pain and suffering Hazael will bring on Israel in the coming years. Elisha knows the truth that the writer of 2 Kings sets down as a summary of this era: *"In those days, the LORD began to reduce the size of Israel."*

Syria will be the first instrument in God's hand to "bring Israel down." In a few years the Syrians will capture most of northern Israel, and could have conquered the whole country had they themselves not been attacked by their powerful neighbor to the north, the growing Assyrian empire centered on great cities like Nineveh and Carchemish. Before long, the Assyrians would rule from

Babylon to Tarsus and down to the Upper Nile region of Egypt. Elisha sees all this coming, first at the hands of Hazael of Syria, and he weeps for his people Israel. Generations later, Jesus, looking across at Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, weeps over its coming destruction by the Romans.

Elisha has one more king to anoint, however: Jehu, the army commander, is the next king of Israel, as the LORD had instructed Elijah. Once anointed, Jehu wastes no time in killing king Joram and all the other sons of Ahab. And in a bloody scene, he rides into Samaria and calls for anyone who will join him to finally dispose of Jezebel. Someone throws her down from a tower and her blood spatters the streets; and as Elijah had prophesied, the dogs arrive. No wonder Elisha, the healer, weeps!

4) *Succeeding*

Elisha, successor to the greatest of the prophets, has no easy calling. Even if he has "twice the spirit" of the LORD on him that Elijah had, his ministry is hard. Mercifully for Elisha, and wisely, his ministry is very different. Instead of confronting, he heals; instead of battling the prophets of Baal, he feeds the prophets of the LORD. When he is called to confront, he weeps at the outcome.

So it is for anyone who is to "succeed" as the successor to a notable person. The "torch has been passed to a new generation," as John Kennedy famously said 47 years ago. The new generation are unwise if they simply copy those who have gone before them. They may be loyal to their memory, may have been their apprentices, even their companions and friends, but their calling is different.

That is true for prophets, that is true for kings, that is true for presidents, that is true for pastors, that is true for parents. Each is

different, should be different, from the one before. The Lord is the same yesterday, today and forever; and at root his calling to each one of us is the same – a calling to him. But beyond that are the different gifts he assigns to each person, and the different callings that fit those gifts.

So if your predecessor was confrontational, maybe your calling is to be a healer! Don't try to do all the things your mother did! – you're not her, and the times she lived in were very different from yours. Father, don't expect your kids to do what you have done – their gifts and their callings are different from yours, and the world they live in is *very* different from the one you grew up in! Don't expect your church will always be the same; it changes over time as its people and its pastors change. God is still in charge; he is still calling people to serve him; he is still telling each new generation to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ by word and deed.

But to “succeed” as a “successor,” each of us has to hear the call of the Lord afresh, for ourselves, and then follow his leading for our particular time and place in history.

Let us pray...