

Taken up to Heaven

2 Kings 2:1-12

Pastor Buss

The sergeant was talking to his men before they went into battle. He said: *“Listen boys, we’ve got the best medical team in the world working for us. If you’re hit, they’ll take care of you, so don’t worry.”* One young private from the back of the group asked: *“Sarge? When you get hit, how do you know whether you’re dead or alive?”* *“That’s easy,”* replied the sarge. *“If you’re hungry and your feet are cold, you’re alive.”* *“How do you figure that?”* asked the private. *“Well, if you’re hungry, you can be sure you’re not in heaven. And if your feet are cold, you sure aren’t in hell!”*

In a humorous way, that story points out one of the main concerns of life – namely, what happens to you when you die. The Bible clearly teaches that if you’re an unbeliever, you go straight to hell. However, if you’re a believer in Jesus Christ, you immediately go to heaven. And our Old Testament Lesson for this Transfiguration Sunday gives us reassurance that that is true. It’s the account of the prophet Elijah’s glorification, being taken up into heaven.

Now according to our text, before God took Elijah out of this life, He allowed him to visit with his disciples to give them final instructions. We are told that Elijah went to Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho where the schools of prophets were located. And undoubtedly he shared with them the urgent importance of carrying on his mission and ministry of spreading God’s Word. This was especially true for young Elisha, who had been appointed to be Elijah’s successor. He in particular would follow in the prophet’s footsteps, boldly proclaiming God’s message to the people. No doubt, that’s why he asked Elijah for a double portion of his spirit. This is a reference to Deuteronomy 21:17 and the right of the firstborn. According to Jewish law, the firstborn son received a double blessing of his father’s inheritance. It was the sign of succession. The changing of the guard, if you will, passing the torch from one generation to another. In this case, it was the passing of the torch of God’s Word from Elijah to Elisha, with the reminder that the only way that the flame of the Gospel can stay lit is by the double blessing of the Holy Spirit, which is His presence and power.

In other words, Elijah's glorification was for the strengthening of his followers – to confirm them in their resolve to preach the Word. That's why before he departed from them, Elijah rolled up his cloak, struck the waters of the Jordan, and it parted in two, similar to what Moses the great prophet had done years earlier at the Red Sea, and Joshua did later on at the Jordan river. The key thing, however, is that after Elijah was gone, Elisha picked up the cloak and performed the same miracle. It was a sign to the prophets, that although Elijah was gone, the spirit of Elijah – the almighty Holy Spirit was still with them, to empower them in their ministry. The Spirit would enable them to divide the waters of adversity and get the message through.

Interestingly enough, that's the same message that Jesus' Transfiguration was meant to convey. You see, Elijah was actually a forerunner or foreshadowing of Christ. For just as Elijah was glorified and taken into heaven without tasting death, so Jesus was glorified at His resurrection, and taken up to heaven at His ascension. The big difference is, Jesus actually did taste death for us at the cross, so that we would not have to taste the bitter pains of eternal death. That's what His transfiguration was meant to indicate. It was a sign that although He would die a horrible death for us to save us from the horrors of sin, death and hell, He would rise from the grave with a glorified body, and ascend into Heaven, in order to send the Holy Spirit to His disciples.

That's why the Transfiguration took place shortly before the Crucifixion – to reassure His disciples that although He would suffer terribly, He would win for them the victory. Likewise, Transfiguration Sunday takes place just before Lent as a reminder to us, that although we have to go through this dark and sorrowful season, Easter is coming, when we can rejoice in the victory Jesus has won for us over sin and Satan, death and the grave. Not only that, but the Transfiguration was the changing of the guard, if you will – Jesus passing the torch to His disciples, reminding them that they were to carry on His work of preaching the Gospel. They were to be His successors.

Well, my friends, that rite of succession also belongs to you and me as well, for we too, are disciples of Jesus Christ. And in our Baptism, we too have received a double portion of the Spirit. Like firstborn sons we have inherited the double blessing of the Spirit's presence and power. At Baptism He comes to dwell in our heart to give us gift of saving faith and

to keep us in that faith. He also gives us talents and abilities in our life, equipping us for ministry in the kingdom. The crucial thing, is that like Elisha we must pick up that cloak of succession and carry on.

For instance, you and I can support the mission and ministry of the Gospel with our prayers and financial contributions. We can give a gift to help the work of our partner church in South Africa and pray for our foreign missionaries. Recently I read about Carolyn Fiedler, who teaches music at a congregation in Iruna, Paraguay, and also shares the Gospel. Once, she befriended a young paraplegic boy, named Gentilho, by providing him with a wheelchair. This gave her opportunity then, to speak with him about Jesus his savior, and he was baptized, which was very timely, for one month later Gentilho became sick and died. But before he died, he cried out: *“The devil has a hold on me and wants to take me with him.”* He asked for the Bible Carolyn had given him and his mother placed it in his left arm across his heart. Clenching to the Bible, he made this bold confession: *“Devil, you can’t have me! I am God’s child, and God is much stronger than you are!”* And with that, he fell asleep in Jesus.

My friends, the only way that kind of mission work can go on is through our prayers and support. For that is part of what it means for us to be successors of Jesus, carrying on with the Gospel. But at the same time, we ourselves also need to be witnessing for Jesus, wherever he gives us opportunity. The problem is that we often lose the zeal and desire. We become hesitant, because we don’t want to offend, or afraid of what people will think of us. And when that happens, we drop the cloak of succession and fail to carry on with the Gospel!

Fortunately for us, though, our text has a reassuring message. It reminds us that although we do often fail at our call to witness and share the Gospel, the success of the Gospel does not depend upon you and me, but upon the Holy Spirit. Even more important than that, it reminds us that the Gospel itself does not depend upon you and me, but upon God’s unlimited grace. Yes, by ourselves, you and I do fail miserably in all our sins and faults and short-comings. But the Good News is, that where we fail, God succeeds. He succeeds mightily in forgiving and saving us.

The case of Elijah himself is a perfect example of that. Although he was one of the great men of faith, one of the greatest prophets who ever

lived, he too was just a sinner. Think of the time he cowered in fear, because of the prophets of Baal, and even entertained suicidal thoughts, wanting to die rather than continue preaching the word. Yes, Elijah also had feet of clay, just like you and me. Nevertheless, look what God did for him. In spite of his sins and faults and shortcomings, God still pardoned and redeemed him through the gift of saving faith. And the reason we know that, is because in our text God instantaneously glorified him and took him to heaven!

What a beautiful picture of God's grace. Salvation is a free gift. There's nothing we can do to work for it or earn it. God simply hands it to us on a silver platter, through faith in Jesus Christ. No doubt that is one of the reasons why Elijah was present at Jesus' Transfiguration. As a reminder of God's grace, that all those who believe in Jesus will receive the same gift that Elijah received. They will not die eternally, but be taken to heaven to live with God forever. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word *take* actually means: 'to snatch something, like seizing the plunder or taking a wife.' It's a marvelous description of how God views us in Christ Jesus. He sees you as His prized possession, His beautiful, spotless heavenly bride. And He will do everything in His power to snatch you away from the devil's claws and keep you in His eternal kingdom.

Maybe that's why God chose the dramatic way to glorify Elijah that He did – the chariots and horses of fire. It was a symbol of His divine protection, His ability to defend us against all our enemies. And at the same time it's a reminder that the only way we can pass into His presence is through His cleansing fire. We can only get into heaven by having the dross of our sinful impurities burned up in Jesus' forgiving love. And that's what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. He began that good work in us at our Baptism, and He will bring it to completion on the Final Day, when He comes in glory to take us Home. We will either be raised up with a brand new glorified body, or transformed and transfigured like Jesus and Elijah were, in moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. That is the gift of the Gospel, that Jesus offers to us freely by faith in Him. May that Good News encourage our faith in Jesus and inspire us to pick up His cloak of succession, by carrying on the Gospel with our prayers, our gifts, and our witness. For Jesus' sake. Amen.