

JOURNEYS' ENDING - ELIJAH'S SWEET CHARIOT

Eastertide

II Kings 2:1-12

A Sermon Preached by
Pastor Amy Roon
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
April 22, 2018

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

II Kings 2:1-12¹

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 in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. 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 not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty 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 rolled 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 into two pieces.

Amy Roon

Please pray with me.

God,
Be in my head;
Be in my heart;
Be in my understanding;
Be in the words heard and in the words spoken.
Amen

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

JOURNEYS' ENDING - ELIJAH'S SWEET CHARIOT

I want to be known for more than the sum total of the wrongs done against me. I have a temper (ahem) and I have a pretty decent handed righteous indignation and righteous angry speech or speeches since I was a young girl. At one point while living in community during seminary I was in full form in a shared kitchen with one of my housemates. I honestly do not even remember what I was angry about. I do remember pausing for breath and looking up to see my friend Julia eating ice cream and just watching me like it was a theater show. And I apologized. I knew the rant I'd been on had actually started as a conversation, and she had clearly not gotten the word in edgewise for quite some time. And she surprised me with her delighted, "No! I love it. You're right! And I feel the same way, and I have ... I don't know how to get angry like that. Ah! It feels great!"

I'd never realized or gotten that feedback quite so directly before. But in fact there is a place for righteous anger and speeches and when I'm using my righteous anger well, it should feel like that. The trouble is, especially—especially—when anger is justifiable, it's so easy to get focused on articulating and amplifying why we're angry that that becomes the main story. And there are so many things to be justifiably, righteously, indignantly angry about. But we want to be known for more than the sum total of the wrongs done against us. Right?

Every Bible story is a record of how a community wants you to remember someone. Sometimes this Bible story is telling you what someone did. And in all cases this is what *should* have happened in order for you to understand how important they really are. So you know, if I had a meal and I'm a really important person, it doesn't really matter if what I actually ate was bread and water. If you as a community want to remember that I was an important person who came to your house and had a meal, you're going to describe all the things you would have served me, okay? And that's how the Bible is true and some of it happened. All right. So sometimes we hear about what someone did. Sometimes it's a story of how someone was born or should've been born. Sometimes by telling you how they died. And sometimes that person's life was so important that the community doesn't have the story end with death, because they are not done having them in their lives.

Elijah is one of the prophets most anyone might know and yet not even know why. Because you don't have to be religious to have at least heard of him and know he was famous for *something*. You probably know this story or have a vision of it in part from many songs—Am I right, choir—many songs about Elijah. And this particular story, it's a song I sang at my great aunt's funeral—the first time I ever had to grieve and cry and publicly sing at the same time. It's a song I've found that bedtimes of the dying. The song I sang as my mother gasped her last breath. It's the song I've song in celebration and community with others, in spontaneous post memorial gatherings and remembrance and connection. I can't say I'm really thinking of Elijah in those moments, but then that's how these *big stories and these *bigger than life characters, that's how they go. They get all caught up in our living in ways that we might not even notice when and how their story became part of our story.

Elijah was known for his miracles and for his leadership. And in this story, as is often the case in a journey's ending, we get several symbolic ways. The authors are trying to ask us to remember him. Elijah's death is foretold by *three* different communities of disciples who in their exchange with Elisha also recognized very subtly and foretell of the transfer of leadership from Elijah to Elisha. "Do you know your master is going to be taken away?" "Do you know your master's going be taken away?" Three times; three different communities. And we're reminded of the great prophet Moses and are invited to see Elijah in that great tradition when Elijah takes his mantle to part the waters of the River

JOURNEYS' ENDING - ELIJAH'S SWEET CHARIOT

Jordan and crossover on dry land. And we're reminded of the closeness of Elisha and Elijah when Elisha calls him father and asks for a *double* portion of his spirit, as a firstborn son might be expected to receive a larger inheritance than his siblings. We are reminded of how the great ones always have someone who carries on in remembrance of them. For this, this story of Elijah's ending is far less about a death or Elijah's ending as a description of the great relay of the arc of justice and the prophetic voice. It's about a handoff, not just an ending.

Isn't that the longing of every *body* here when it really comes down to it? I have no idea and no control really over whether or not there's a heaven, and so what will my next chapter be after I die? I do not know. But I hope to live in a way that my life's work will continue when I'm gone. I can live in community and family in ways that hopefully there will be someone who sings for me. Sometimes even when I'm still living someone else can sing for me when I have no more voice left. Someone who steps up to leadership after me, someone who remembers me when they set their table—which begs the question, are we living now how we would want to be remembered? Are we teaching and mentoring in ways that others will want to and should take up this work when we're gone? Are we shaping and engaging in our dying stories with the intent that this is more of a handoff than a journey's end.

As a congregation we've recently centered our work on dismantling racism. Some of you found this work because of changes that have happened in your immediate families. Some of you found this work because it's happening in the world around you and the more you learn the more just made sense to you and so your passion was to make sure that surely the more people who are just heard more about this travesty would simply make the change. No one who knew this would just continue being racist! Some of you don't think this work is about you, but you love your church so you're willing to let this be someone else's passion for now. Some of you really wish we'd move on to other topics. Some of us can't escape this work even if we wanted to. Some of you started this work vim and vigor in the kind of aspirational can-do attitude I only had when I was younger and could hide in a veil of lighter skin, good hair, a large vocabulary, and a lack of information about how white supremacy was built into my very feelings of confidence.

The older I get the more my hot energetic righteous anger fades to fuel my depression and grief and adds to a general feeling of being overwhelmed. This is *so* much bigger, it's so much more pervasive, it's so *deeply* in us, that it's in people we trust, it's in people we admire. It's in me. It's and you. I want my life to be more than the sum total of the wrongs done against me and, oh, *do I want my life to be more than the sum total of wrongs I have done!* This little phrase carries me out of the sad and angry place, because it reminds me that I don't have to fix all the wrongs of the world before I can experience joy. I don't have to fix all of the wrongs of the world before I can do something silly and creative and loving. That I don't want my life to just be a history of slavery and wandering in the wilderness. If I don't want that, I better get better about talking about and about *being* about the Promised Land, too.

There is, in fact, a *lot* about Elijah's life that was truly hard and miserable. He spoke incredibly hard truths to incredibly powerful people. And I'm pretty sure that wasn't any more fun for him than it would be for any of us. He was ostracized. He was alone. He was hungry. He was poor. He was also depicted as persecuted. And he is known for these things. But whoever he was and whatever he did,

JOURNEYS' ENDING - ELIJAH'S SWEET CHARIOT

we know him now as so much more than a catalog of wrongs done against him and miseries he endured.

Living in our anti-racism work is also about being at peace with the chapter we're in, rather than seeing it as a problem we need to solve by Tuesday. Being about this work of justice, of speaking hard truths, can also look like a community full of deep, authentic joy and laughter, of celebrations of new life, of the incredible deep contentment and satisfaction that comes from working together, as over 150 superfluous volunteers can attest. Amen? [*Amen.*] This is ultimately why I am a church member. Because I don't want to try to do the work of dismantling white supremacy, of advocating for mental health care, or homelessness, or for children or immigrants or any other other, without a community that does this work while reminding me that we are more than the sum total of what we're pushing against. We are singers. We're welcomers. We're teachers and youths. We are loving parents and rambunctious children. We're wise elders, movers, shakers; yes, even dancers. We're artists, gardeners, and at least one shepherd. We are overflowing with God's abundant love and I want double share of that. I want to be known for the ways I learned to let the love of God flow through me. And that's what we do here. This is our story and the sum of who we are is so much more than the sum of the injustice we push against. – Amen.

UCUCC: AR

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2018/6/20/2018