

## 2 Kings 2:1-12a

<sup>1</sup>When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah was traveling with Elisha from Gilgal. <sup>2</sup> Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here, for the LORD has sent me to Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. <sup>3</sup> The sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD is taking your master away from you?” Then he said, “Yes, I know. Be quiet.” <sup>4</sup> Then Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here because the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho. <sup>5</sup> Then the sons of the prophets who were in Jericho approached Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD is taking your master away from you?” He said, “Yes, I know. Be quiet.” <sup>6</sup> Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here because the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. <sup>7</sup> Then fifty men from the sons of the prophets came and stood and watched them from a distance, while the two of them were standing at the Jordan. <sup>8</sup> Elijah took his cloak, folded it together, and struck the water. The water divided to the right and to the left. Then the two of them crossed on dry land. <sup>9</sup> When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask me for whatever I can do for you before I am taken from you.” Then Elisha said, “Let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.” <sup>10</sup> He said, “You have asked for a difficult thing. If you see me being taken from you, it will surely be yours. But if not, then it will not.” <sup>11</sup> While they were walking and talking, suddenly a chariot of fire, and horses of fire came and separated them. So Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. <sup>12</sup> Elisha was watching and crying out, “My father! My father! Israel’s chariot and its charioteers!” Then he did not see him anymore.

Theme: “The Chariots and Charioteers of Israel!”

1. They are saving lights in a sin-darkened society
2. They are zealous servants of the LORD

Sermon for Transfiguration, St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Green Garden, MI

In the name of Jesus, dear fellow redeemed,

When Peter, James and John went with Jesus up the Holy Mountain our gospel reading today tells us they were frightened. In fact, they were so scared that Peter could hardly find the words to speak. But why were they frightened at seeing Jesus in the splendor of his heavenly glory along with Elijah and Moses? But remember, they were sinful human beings and this amazing and brilliant, heavenly sight was probably overwhelming for them since they really were not expecting to see it. The sight overwhelmed them in their sinfulness, for they surely realized that they did not deserve to see it or even be there.

## Page 2

The only thing Peter could think of to say was that they should put up three shelters, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus in order for them to have a permanent dwelling. We can assume that Peter expected that he and James and John would also dwell there. Peter was really saying, “I don’t want to leave, even though I am frightened. So let’s preserve this moment—forever if possible. But God did not want that. Instead he wanted these three disciples to be witnesses to Jesus’ glory BEFORE he suffered and died because he still had a lot of work left for them to do. Jesus made the Father’s will known by telling them that they were to be witnesses about what they saw, but not until after Jesus had risen from the dead. Once he rose from the grave they would witness to a world of sinful people who needed to know the truth about the Savior who had died and risen from the dead. They would be God’s gospel-warriors.

They would continue a long line of gospel-warriors who fought faithfully for the truth of God’s Word even when his people were unfaithful to him. We remember men such as Moses, Samuel and Nathan. Our Old Testament reading today supplies us with the names of two other faithful gospel-warriors. The Bible calls Elijah and Elisha, the chariots and charioteers of Israel, perhaps because the battles against sin and idolatry were so fierce in their time. And even though they were sometimes discouraged and even frightened, just as the disciples, God moved them to continue the battles against sin and idolatry as those who are the chariots and charioteers of Israel. They are saving lights in a sin-darkened society; they are zealous servants of the LORD.

We find Elijah makes his entrance onto the pages of scripture with little background except we learn he is from a place called Tishbe. The spiritual state of the people of Israel at the time was deplorable largely because King Ahab and wicked queen Jezebel actively promoted and supported the worship of the false gods known as the Baals. Jezebel was the daughter of Eth-baal king of Sidon. Jezebel fed, clothed and housed the 450 false prophets of Baal and several hundred more cult prostitutes. Most people in the northern kingdom worshiped Baal in the form of golden calves that had been put in place at Bethel in the south and at Dan in the north. Ahab instituted and promoted child sacrifice in the northern kingdom. Israel’s spiritual state was so grim that one of the first things we hear Elijah doing was to declare that there would be a drought. Surely that was symbolic of the drought of God’s Word among his people similar to the words of Amos: “The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign LORD, ‘when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the Words of the LORD.’ (Amos 8:11)

Without a doubt Elijah worked tirelessly as God’s light to spread his Word in Israel. But when the drought came and Elijah’s life was in danger, the LORD sent him to the Kerith ravine where he could drink from the brook there. The Lord also sent ravens to bring food for Elijah, morning and evening. But when the brook dried up as God’s Word was drying up in Israel, the Lord then sent Elijah up to a small town called Zephath near Jezebel’s hometown of Sidon. Israel had all but snuffed out the Light of God’s

### page 3

Word, so the Lord sent his 'servant of light' up to the heathen there Elijah stayed with a widow and her son. While he was with them, God supplied the prophet along with the widow and her son, with enough flour and oil to have opportunity to share the gospel with this starving heathen woman and he brought that light into her and her son's lives. So when the woman's son became ill and died and the woman asked Elijah if he had only come to remind her of her sins, he showed her God's mercy and glorious power by raising her son from the dead. The woman then showed that God's word through Elijah had born fruit in her life, **Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."** That had been one of the bright spots of Elijah's ministry. But to the prophet those had seemed few and far between.

Now as the Lord apparently was bringing Elijah's ministry to a close, he wanted to make sure that the light of God's Word would be carried to the next generation. Previous to these events here, the Lord had told Elijah to go and call Elisha to be the next prophet and the leader of the schools of the prophets at Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho. This seems to be the reason Elijah was taking Elisha around to each of these three training schools of the prophets. It would be Elisha's life's work from now on to keep carrying the light of God's Word to the people of Israel so that this light would grow ever so slowly. But even then, some hundred years later when the northern kingdom was exiled by the Assyrian empire, those who were believers would continue to spread this light to other parts of the world. In those parts of the world, too, the Light of God's love and mercy in the coming Savior would be a light for the gentiles.

So even though Elijah may have been very discouraged about his ministry and that so few people in Israel seemed to be believers, The Lord did not allow the light of his word to be snuffed out. God made this evident to Elijah, too. As he and Elisha were walking along Elijah asked his understudy, **"Ask me for whatever I can do for you before I am taken from you."** Elisha's reply shows the holy desire that God caused to live in the new prophet's heart: **"Let there be a double portion of your spirit on me"** was Elisha's answer. This was his way of asking that if it is God's will that he would be selected as the prophet who would replace Elijah. In other words Elisha would consider it a privilege to be chosen to carry on the Light of God's Word to the next generation. By this, Elijah knew that the glory of God in his promises about the Savior would not die out. And when Elisha saw Elijah being taken up to heaven he declared that Elijah had been a spiritual warrior for the Lord by calling him the chariots and charioteers of Israel.

This is the very reason that you and I still live in this world. God calls us to be his charioteers and chariots. At times perhaps we get discouraged as Elijah did. Perhaps we would rather have God take us out of this spiritual darkness once and for all. But when we have those thoughts we forget that the Lord has chosen us also to keep fighting for his truth in a sin-darkened world. The idols we battle may not be golden calves instead many are chrome plated, and others are made of green paper. We may not sacrifice our children

## page 4

to idols, but many are sacrificed on the altar of convenience through abortion. Yet this is why we are here. Because Jesus Christ whose whole life and work was approved by his Father in the glory of his transfiguration, this Jesus has died for all sins of all people. This is the light that our God wants us to carry to our friends, loved ones, and neighbors so that the light of his mercy and love will shine brightly in their hearts and lives and they will know that God is love.

Elijah knew that God freely gave his love to him and to all people. It was this love of God that caused Elijah to serve the LORD with a zeal that consumed his life.

The spiritual state of Israel had reached the breaking point midway through Elijah's career. The majority of Israelites worshiped Baal and Queen Jezebel had been killing many of God's prophets. God had caused the effects of the drought in Israel to reach a critical mass. Good grazing land was hard to find. The Lord told Elijah to present himself before Ahab. When he did Elijah had a challenge to Ahab, Jezebel and the 450 prophets of Baal whom they kept fed and clothed. In essence Elijah said to them, "Do you really want to know who is God in Israel? I challenge you to a spiritual dual. Ahab, you round up the prophets of Baal and all the people of Israel and meet me on Mt. Carmel. There we will set up two altars each with separate sacrifices. The prophets of Baal will make their sacrifice to Baal and I will make a sacrifice to the Lord but we will not burn the sacrifice. Instead Baal's prophets will pray to him and I will pray to the Lord and the god that answers by fire will prove that he is truly God in Israel."

Elijah was not afraid to stand up to Ahab and Jezebel in order to witness to the people of Israel that the LORD who had led them out of Egypt, who had brought them through the Red Sea, given them manna in the wilderness and had been with them through the tumultuous period of the Judges, given them victory and peace during the reigns of David and Solomon and countless other blessings; that Lord had promised to send the Savior and even now he was ready and willing to forgive their sins. Elijah was not afraid to witness to the people of Israel to show them God's power and he did so with great zeal for God and for his truth. God's love and mercy had so touched his heart that all he could do was to continue to be a spiritual warrior for God's truth.

On Mt. Carmel the prophets of Baal could not coax so much as a small spark from Baal even after hours of pleading. But when Elijah offered his short prayer of only a few sentences the LORD answered so powerfully that the entire offering, altar and all was consumed, to the shocked amazement of the people. Elijah loved God and he loved his truth even when it was a risk to his own life.

Some time later Ahab had one of his neighbors falsely accused and put to death just so he could take possession of the mans vineyard for a vegetable garden. Once again, Elijah was not afraid to stand up to King Ahab and condemn both him and his wife Jezebel for they had conspired together to steal this vineyard. Elijah did all of this in a very hostile environment. The Israelites did not love and honor him. They hated God's Word. Jesus pointed to the unbelief of the Jews at his time as being the same as at the

## page 5

time of Elijah. There were many widows in Israel at that time but God did not send his prophet to any of Israel's widows, but to the widow of Zarephath of Sidon; AND he said, now one greater than Elijah is here and you still don't believe him. Jesus, too, stood up for his Father's truth to emphasize that God's truth is too precious for us to give up.

So when Elijah knew he would soon leave this world, he wanted to pass on his zeal, his love for God's truth to his successor. The Lord had placed this same spirit in Elisha. Elijah had asked his understudy, "**Ask me for whatever I can do for you before I am taken from you.**" And Elisha simply replied, "**Let there be a double portion of your spirit on me**". Now Elisha was not asking that he would be twice as effective but simply that by God's gracious choice he might inherit Elijah's place as prophet. You see, Elisha could never have asked for this unless he was already zealous for the Lord and his truth. Elijah told him "**if you see me when I am taken from you, then be sure that you are the prophet chosen to replace me.**"

When Gods angels and chariots escorted Elijah to heaven without suffering death, the prophet's cloak fell to the ground. This was the cloak that was symbolic of his office. The cloak and most importantly, the office now belonged to Elisha. Just a short time before all this happened Elijah had used this very cloak to part the waters of the Jordan River so that the two of them could cross on dry ground. Not long after Elijah was taken to heaven Elisha did the same miracle when he crossed back over the Jordan. He was willing to receive the Word of God and continue with zeal the ministry of God that had been Elijah's.

We should make no mistake, the spiritual climate we live in bears a lot of similarities to the times of Elijah and Elisha. Yet God in his mercy has claimed us as his children. And because we are, we sill suffer, sometimes rather harshly. It tempts us to forsake God's truth; and how often we have turned away, only to have God's Word convict us. How does a child of God live his life with zeal for the Lord? We shouldn't think that God's prophets of old were some how different than we. Elisha was a farmer, yet God called him to be prophet. But it was the Holy Spirit who gave him zeal for God. The Spirit gave him a love for God's Word and promises. He was the chariots and charioteers of Israel.

As we stand at the threshold of the Lenten season we cannot help but see the zeal our Lord Jesus had for us as he allowed himself to be taken captive by false accusations. He allowed sinful people to trample his reputation and call him demon possessed. He allowed people to accuse him of false motives and hatred for God. In reality his love for us is what sparked the zeal of Elijah and Elisha and believers of all times. Even though our world mocks us for believing in a 6 day creation, though it urges us to salve our hurts with alcohol and drugs, though it says sexual relations outside of marriage doesn't hurt anyone, we see our Saviors death and his resurrection for us and we can do nothing else but defend his truth, that sin is wrong, that sin destroys. And because Jesus has paid for sin and destroyed it, we cannot go back to it again. We have been buried with our Lord Jesus by baptism into his death so that just as he was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we, too may live a new life. This new life that we have is what moves us to be his lights in this world so dark with sin and to witness with zeal until the final day dawns with the full light of his truth. Amen.