

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Transfiguration Sunday

February 15, 2015

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

2 Kings 2:1-12

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?” “Yes, I know,” Elisha replied, “so be quiet.” Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho. The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?” “Yes, I know,” he replied, “so be quiet.” Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on. Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied. “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.” As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. (NIV 2011)

Two Wednesdays ago Lisa cleaned for a lady named Jeanna, whom she had been helping off and on since October. Lisa had become friends with Jeanna. Then the next day after Lisa was over, Jeanna went to the YMCA, slipped, hit her head, and died. We received the message on Thursday when we were in Wisconsin. This past Tuesday we attended her funeral at Beautiful Savior. Just like that she was gone and Lisa will see her no more – not until the reunion in heaven.

Have you thought about your death? Will your life be ended abruptly in a car accident or by a stroke or heart attack? Will your life end on an operating table or in your own bed? Will you be young, middle age, or well advanced in years when your earthly life comes to an end? I’m not trying to depress you today. In fact, my prayer is God’s Word does just the opposite. I don’t know about you but I’d kind of like to go like Elijah – in literally a blaze of glory! I doubt he would have ever guessed that God was going to take him up to heaven this way – in a whirlwind! But, friends, today I pray you understand that no matter how or when God takes you your death will be glorious – just as glorious as it was for Elijah. That is because those of us who fall asleep in Jesus will be escorted to the very same place Elijah was taken. We will be with the Lord forever. Find comfort in these words this morning and join me in praying: **Lord, grant me a glorious death. Take me to glory in your time. Allow me to share your glory before I leave.**

Do you remember the Lord's zealous prophet Elijah? Elijah powerfully rebukes sin and points people to the true God. Elijah serves at a time when Israel is in great need of a man of God. Most of Elijah's ministry takes place when wicked King Ahab sits on the throne with his scheming wife Jezebel at his side. God Himself testifies about this idolatrous king: "***Ahab did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him***" (1 Kings 16). Due to this difficult ministry, go back to 1 Kings 19 and there you will find a tired and discouraged prophet who wants to die. In fact, Elijah asks the Lord to take his life. But the Lord was not ready to grant his request. The Lord still had work for Elijah to do. Just think of that for a second. If the Lord would have granted Elijah's request at that time, if Elijah would have refused to wait on the Lord's timetable, Elijah would have missed out on what we read here.

We read: "***The LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind.***" Before the Lord takes His prophet to heaven in this special way, God somehow makes it known that Elijah was going to be taken. Now if you knew that God was going to take your loved one soon what would you do? You probably would act very similar to Elisha. He did not want to leave the side of his mentor and friend. When others remind him that Elijah is going he does not want to talk about it. So this is what we see as Elijah, with Elisha right there by his side, make an almost triangular journey from Gilgal west to Bethel and then back southeast to Jericho. Before Elijah goes God commands him to visit these schools of prophets. Evidently there were schools of music and religion conducted by one of God's inspired prophets to provide a supply of messengers through whom God would speak to His people.

And then the time comes. The Lord is ready to take Elijah. Together Elijah and Elisha are on the other side of the Jordan, some distance from 50 men of the company of the prophets. As they were talking and walking together "***suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.***" What an awesome sight! God takes one of His own to be with Him. He takes Elijah to heaven. He escorts His prophet to His side with a chariot of fire and horses of fire. Though it is a painful loss for Elisha, who for the rest of his earthly life would see Elijah no more, for Elijah this departure is a glorious gain. Elijah had kept the faith, finished his race, and now he would receive a crown of righteousness which the Lord prepared for him.

Are we ready for God to take us? What if the Lord made it known that today He was going to bring us to His side? Would we argue for more time? Would we complain that it is too soon? Do we foolishly want to hold on too tightly to earthly things and our earthly home? Or would we confess with the psalmist that our time is in God's hands and trust the Lord to take us to glory in His time. Do we understand heaven is our goal and true home? On the other side if it seems like God is having us wait might we be tempted to say our life has no value anymore and we are better off dead like Elijah once sinfully did? Or will we trust if the Lord keeps us around He has plans for us and work for us to do? I have to admit, and I'm sure you would too, that when it comes to our departure from this earth there are times when we would rather have it in our hands. We too often sin by not trusting the Lord to take us when He knows best. We sin whenever we fail to see the death of every Christian as a glorious departure.

This is true because of a perfect someone who always placed His life and death into the heavenly Father's hands. Of course, I'm talking about Jesus. Jesus, much like Elijah, also knew He would soon depart. On the mountain of transfiguration our Gospel lesson from Mark today tells us Elijah, along with Moses, were there talking to Jesus. Mark doesn't tell us what they were talking about - but Luke does! He writes: "***They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.***" This is why, after revealing His glory as true God,

Jesus ignores the disciples request to stay on the mountain. God had work for Jesus to do. God wasn't going to take Jesus up to heaven in a whirlwind, instead he would forsake Jesus on a cross. God would punish Jesus with the sins of us all. Jesus died for the sins of us all. Even as Jesus was suffering our hell and paying the punishment we sinners deserve His trust never wavered. Jesus allowed God to take his life when He saw fit as He cried: ***"Father into your hands I commit my spirit."*** Trusting He would be raised on the third day, Jesus is not let down.

Now, even in death, neither will we be! This is why you and I will have a glorious death. We will die knowing we are right with God because of Jesus our righteousness. At the very moment of our death, our souls will be taken to the paradise our Savior has prepared for us. On the last day, we will be given glorified bodies, which will be escorted by angels to the Father's side. The Lord grants a glorious death to those whose lives end in faith in Jesus!

Until that day comes when our Lord takes us to glory, pray with me this morning that our gracious Lord also allows us to share His glory before we leave. I find a couple of things interesting in this account. One is what Elisha asks for before Elijah is taken, and another is Elisha's response as Elijah is taken. First of all, look at what Elisha asks for when Elijah says ***"Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"*** Elisha replies: ***"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit."***

This is the request of a firstborn son, who, under Hebrew law, would inherit twice as much as any other sons in the family. But Elisha is not asking for double the money or fame or honor. He asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Much like the request of Solomon, Elisha is asking for a gift that will benefit God's kingdom. Elisha wants that God-serving, faithful spirit of the prophet Elijah. He too wants to be bold and zealous in proclaiming God's truth and refusing to conform to the ways of his wicked society. He too wants the Holy Spirit to strengthen him mightily to do the Lord's work. What a God-pleasing request! He wants to tell others, like Elijah, about the glory of the Lord. Elijah tells Elisha that he is asking a difficult thing. This is something only God can give, so Elijah tells him if he see him when he is taken this gift will be his.

The other thing I find noteworthy is Elisha's response as Elijah goes up to heaven in a whirlwind. ***"Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!"*** Please understand this is spoken in reference to Elijah and not the fiery chariot and horses. This is the same expression which will be used for Elisha at his departure. In what way was Elijah ***"the chariots and horsemen of Israel?"*** Israel's greatest enemies were not the hostile nations around them—not the powerful Assyrians, or the clever Ammonites. Israel's greatest enemy remained within her own walls - her sinful, immoral, ungodly self. Israel's greatest defense was not found in Ahab's army of beaming chariots and arrayed horses. Her real defense was the man of God in her midst -the prophet who faithfully proclaimed God's law and gospel. He is the one who pointed others to the Savior. As Elijah is taken, Elisha realizes that He is losing his spiritual father – he is losing the one who shared God's glory with him before he left.

This is what you and I are privileged to do in the time God has remaining for us. We are able to point others to Jesus. We are able to share with others a true love story! One we see most clearly in Lent. We are able to show others true glory! One we see most clearly in the unending joy that is ours in our Savior's empty tomb! Because of Jesus' glory, we don't need to know how or when we will die. There doesn't need to be a fiery chariot and horses and a whirlwind for it to be an awesome sight when God takes one of His own. When death comes for every child of God, it is glorious! It is the victorious completion of a life of faith. It is the day

we will be brought to glory and God's glory will be revealed in us. May the Holy Spirit lead us to use our time now to be zealous for God's kingdom work! Then, when our day has come, God will have answered this prayer: "*Lord, grant me a glorious death.*" Amen.