

“ELIJAH SHOWS THE TRUTH ABOUT HEAVEN”

February 11th, 2018

Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 2:1-12

One of the rules of telling a good story is that you don't want to give away the ending. It's just assumed that a story is more enjoyable if you don't know what is going to happen. There are some exceptions to the rule, though. If you're telling a story to children, and you don't want them to be afraid, you might tell them right away what is going to happen. "This is the story of how Hansel and Gretel defeated the evil witch in the woods." That way, even when the scary part happens, the child can always remember that everything is going to turn out alright in the end. Knowing how the story ends gives them some hope. That's how the writer of 2 Kings begins this account: "**When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal**" (2 Kings 2:1). If you wanted to avoid spoilers about the story, it's too late. You know what is going to happen. By the end the reading, Elijah will be taken up to heaven.

Elijah and Elisha are two of the best known prophets in the Bible. Both of them do some amazing things. Elijah was the older prophet. His ministry was coming to an end though and God had chosen Elisha to take his place. Elijah had found Elisha while he was plowing in his field, and he had taken his cloak off and thrown it around Elisha to show he would inherit his prophetic ministry. Since then, Elisha had followed his master around learning from him and preparing to take over when that day would come. And that day had come.

On the last day those two would spend together on earth, they were traveling. There were these companies of prophets that lived in the area. We don't know exactly what these companies of prophets did. Some people guess that they were the ones responsible for delivering the sermons and messages that God's prophets had spoken to as many people as they can. You could kind of view them like the postal service. They would receive the message from the prophet and then they would go and deliver it from city to city and town to town. But, we don't really know much about them. In this account we see that they have some sort of prophetic ability themselves. Each time that Elijah and Elisha come to one of these groups, they say to Elisha: "**Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?**" (2 Kings 2:3).

Twice Elisha is asked that question. Twice he says to them, "Yes, I know, but be quiet." There's grief in his voice. Elisha knows that this is the last day he has with his friend and master. He knows that after all of this is over, he will carry on the ministry alone. Even though he knows that his friend will be going to heaven, that doesn't make it any easier for them to part ways. We can hear Elisha's dedication when he takes the solemn oath: "**As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you**" (2 Kings 2:4). He makes that promise to Elijah three times, but in the end the matter is taken out of his hands. The Lord will take Elijah from Elisha to a place where Elisha could not yet follow. This wasn't an easy thing. There was true grief and pain here.

After making their last visit, the pair heads for the Jordan river. They cross after Elijah does a miracle. The water of the Jordan river parts to either side of them and they cross on dry ground. When they have crossed, Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him.

What is the last thing the master can give to the student? **“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,’ Elisha replied”** (2 Kings 2:9). It’s a strange request, and a hard one. Even Elijah says so, **“You have asked a difficult thing,’ Elijah said”** (2 Kings 2:10). Is he asking to be twice the prophet that Elijah was? Was he asking to be able to do greater miracles? We see Elisha’s dedication not only to his master, but also to his God. Here, he expresses his dedication to both with his request. He lets Elijah know that he is going to carry on his ministry, and he asks his Lord for the ability to do it.

We know that Elisha gets his request, because he sees Elijah taken away. Sometimes we picture Elijah riding on the chariot of fire as he is taken up to heaven, but it seems like the chariot and the horses were there to separate the two prophets. It was a whirlwind, like a small tornado, that carries Elijah off, with Elisha crying out: **“My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”** (2 Kings 2:12). Then, Elijah was gone. God took him to heaven like Enoch of old. Elijah never died. He never experienced what every human being will before the Lord Jesus returns. But, for Elisha he might as well have died.

Don’t miss this last small detail of how the reading ends: **“Then [Elisha] took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart”** (2 Kings 2:12). You’d think that knowing how the story was going to end would maybe provide some small comfort for Elisha. He knew what was going to happen. But, not in this case. Tearing your clothing was an immense sign of grief. Elisha’s heart was broken. I’ll bet that you know how he was feeling. I’ll bet you know what it’s like to lose a loved one. You’re likely familiar with Elisha’s grief and heartache. Knowing the end of the story doesn’t necessarily make it easier. Even the confidence that when someone dies with faith in Christ they go to heaven doesn’t deaden the pain. That’s okay. It’s okay to hurt like that. But don’t let the hurt overwhelm your trust in the Lord, because the story of Elijah shows us the truth about heaven.

Fast forward to the time long after Elijah and Elisha to when Christ walked the earth. In a similar fashion Jesus was traveling around with his disciples teaching them and preparing them for a time when they would carry on the ministry he would leave them after he too ascended. But, before that he would die. There was a dark period coming for the lives of those apostles, when they would see their Lord captured, beaten, crucified. So, Jesus gives them a glimpse of the end of the story. He shows them what the ending is going to be like, not Jesus defeated and bloody, but glorious in his splendor. **“After six days, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them”** (Mark 9:2-3).

The pain and the hurt that his disciples would feel in that time between Maundy Thursday and Easter would be real, but here Jesus spoils the ending for them so that they can realize how everything would turn out. Jesus would rise from the dead after having won for them the forgiveness of sins and salvation. And don’t miss this detail from the Transfiguration account: **“There appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus”** (Mark 9:4). Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus. Moses was a man who had died long, long ago. Elijah was a man who never died, but we know where he ended up—heaven. Here they both are showing the truth about heaven. There exists a very real place where those who depart from this life go to be with the Lord forever. Even on that mountain, Elijah and Moses were still there—in heaven, face to face with God.

In this account the Holy Spirit pulls back some of the mystery of the story so that we can know what is coming. Elijah would leave his student, but he would go to be with the

Lord. Jesus would set aside the humble state he walked around in before his death, and showed his glory. These facts do not set aside our pain when we lose a loved one, but they do set aside our despair and hopelessness. Those who die in the Lord go to be with him forever, and Elijah proves this. Then, on a day we don't know, we all will rise to receive back our bodies, no longer corrupted by sin, but glorified like Christ's resurrected body. These accounts spoil the ending of the story for us, but it's good that they do, because it gives us hope.

Some day in your life you will face the death of a loved one. Or, someone who know will experience a loss in their life. When that day comes, don't give up hope. Don't despair. Go to your friend and mourn with them. Share their grief. If it is your own grief, don't be afraid of the pain you feel. Elisha was grieved, but one day he was reunited with his master. The disciples felt loss and despair when Christ was captured and killed, but the Lord comforted them, too. In these moments, you don't need to have the right words to say. In fact, there's no combination of words you could say to a person who experiencing such grief that will take it away. Instead, let your trust in the Lord speak clearly and loudly with your mere presence. Because you know the end of the story and you are so confident about that person's eternal state that know words about it need to be said.

I read a book recently by a man named Daniel van Voorhis. He wrote a book called *Monsters* about the problems that he faced in his life, like alcoholism, depression, suicidal thoughts, and so on. But, before he really gets into tell his story he wrote: "Hope is impossible to shake, because somewhere along the line we realize that despair can only be temporary. It has a shelf life. Despair can only really be despair if we know what's written on the last page. We have to know the rest of the story to know that it is hopeless. And as long as that last page isn't written, there's a crack of light. That is hope" (*Monsters*, Daniel van Voorhis). If a person doesn't know what is going to happen, there's the possibility that whatever might happen might be good. As long as that is the case, there's hope. Sure, it might be bad, but it also might be wonderful. There's hope. That is what is true if you don't know what is written on the last page, but the truth is that you do. Elijah shows the truth about heaven. What's written on the last page for those who believe in Jesus is glory, that means that Christian have no need of despair. Forever with the Lord is waiting for us. Amen.