

2 Kings 2 (AM & PM)

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. A warm welcome to you. If you are new to St. John's or visiting this morning, I would love to meet you after the service. Our scripture this morning is 2 Kings chapter 2, the last week of a series in Elijah's ministry before we start Advent next Sunday.

This is a story about succession, passing the baton. And Dan, we didn't choose this passage for the Sunday after the bishop's election.

But succession always means change. And change always makes us anxious, makes us feel nervous. It can be so abrupt. And so if you open your Bibles with me right there in verse 1, it's so abrupt.

Verse 1. Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Wait a second, what? A whirlwind?

Where did that come from? Just so nonchalant. You know, when he was about to take him by a whirlwind, they were just walking along from Gilgal. But succession and change are like that.

They're like a whirlwind.

[1:11] Questions swirling through our minds. What's going to happen after Elijah's gone? Because Israel is still an idolatrous mess. Will the Lord rescue his people?

And so Elisha asks this question for all of us in verse 14. Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? And the answer to the question is in our story. And it's also in the unfolding of God's bigger story, which continues on from 2 Kings chapter 3 until Revelation 22.

A friend said this week that this chapter reminds her of a train station. We see tracks leading into the station. Tracks leading in from Israel's history of Moses and Joshua and the Exodus.

And we pull into the station here in 2 Kings 2 for a marvelous glimpse of God's unwavering faithfulness in his salvation plan. Through succession from Elijah to Elisha.

And then the train pulls out again from the station and it heads off down the tracks. And we will follow it as it leads onwards through Elisha. Through Malachi the prophet.

[2:18] Through John the Baptist. All the way to Jesus the Messiah. Succession. In business. In the church. It can be a messy affair. But God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

He never retires. No need to be anxious if we keep our eyes fixed on him. So this chapter divides very neatly in two. With the whirlwind and the chariots of fire right at the center.

And we'll have two points around that division. First of all, Elijah ascends in verses 1 to 12. And secondly, Elisha succeeds, verses 13 to 25. Let's begin with Elijah ascends.

So right away, verses 1 to 6 introduce this kind of a farewell tour for Elijah. Where he's moving around the land. There's a lot of repetition. The place names are very significant here.

Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, and Jordan. Elijah is retracing Israel's footsteps backwards though.

Through, out of the promised land. The footsteps that Joshua led the people into the promised land during the conquering.

[3:27] Backwards, out across the Jordan River to the place where he'll be taken up by the whirlwind. And this repetition that we're seeing in this part of the chapter confirms that Elisha is determined to stick by his master's side.

To receive the prophetic succession that was promised to him all the way back in 1 Kings 19. Do you remember that? And we have echoes all through this part from the Old Testament books of Exodus and Joshua.

We see that Moses was succeeded by Joshua in the same way Elijah will be succeeded by Elisha. And the echoes continue in verse 8. Have a look.

Then Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water. And the water was parted to the one side and to the other. Till the two of them could go over on dry ground. Of course, this reminds us of

Moses parting the Red Sea.

Joshua parting the Jordan River. So that God's people could go safely through. Next, Elijah addresses Elisha in verse 9. When they crossed over, Elijah said to Elisha, Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.

[4 : 33] And Elisha said, Please, let there be a double portion of your spirit on me. A double portion. What is Elisha asking for here? Well, it's not greedy.

He's not making some sort of greedy request for twice as much power. Double portion is a reference to the firstborn son's inheritance. And Elisha is asking for God to confirm that he will succeed Elijah as Israel's prophet.

And then we get the answer to his bold request right away. Verse 11. As they still went on and talked, Behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them.

And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. Notice that there are two connected displays of God's power and presence here. First of all, the chariots and the horsemen, which symbolize God's strong protection, his military-like force of his spiritual presence.

But Elijah doesn't ride up to heaven in the chariot. I know we like to imagine it that way. But he ascends in the whirlwind, which literally is the storms in the heavens.

[5 : 43] And again, there's echoes of God's theophany here, this time reminding us of God's presence at Mount Sinai. Even most recently, we think of 1 Kings 19. And so verse 12.

Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. And he saw him no more. And then he took his own clothes, and he tore them in two pieces.

So he sees the chariot, confirming that he will receive the double portion that he asked for. And in a marvelous act of God's humor and grace, he actually literally answers his prayer, so that he does literally get a double portion.

Elijah does eight miracles. Elisha does 16 miracles. Twice as many. And then he tears his cloak, which is an act of mourning. The succession involves mourning.

But it also makes it clear that he's making a clear break with his old life. His cloak is now torn in two. What's he going to wear? Oh, he literally takes up the mantle then of Elijah that he dropped on the ground.

[6 : 45] And he puts it on, and he becomes the prophet. But of course, I know the question that's still in your mind. Why is it necessary?

Or why does it happen that Elijah gets carried up into heaven in a whirlwind with a fiery chariot escort? It's utterly unique in Scripture. Well, it's certainly not for theatrics.

And it's not a retirement gift. And it is partially, partly for Elisha's sake. Yes, we've kind of looked at that already. But it's much more for our sake.

Because remember, the image of 2 Kings 2 is like that train station. So that we've seen now how the tracks lead up from Israel's history into the station. But now we have to look forward, and we see how down the track, God is going to use the moment, this amazing moment of the fiery chariots and the whirlwind, to furnish his people's imagination and anticipation for the coming of their rescuer.

So ask yourself, what role did Elijah come to play in Israel's Old Testament Scriptures after this?

[8 : 01] Well, he's in the 9th century. And if we fast forward to the 5th century, the prophet Malachi wrote the last prophetic book, and he picks up on the image of Elijah. And he encourages God's struggling people using an image of the great prophet.

So chapter 4, verse 5 and 6, this is the Lord speaking. See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents. God says, get ready. Someone's coming, just like Elijah. And he will come to continue an Elijah-like ministry of calling you to repentance and faith.

And he's also going to come to prepare the way for my Messiah, the rescuer you've been waiting for. And so what begins as a seed of anticipation in two kings is then watered by the prophet Malachi, and until it flowers 400 years later, when a new prophet bursts forth on the scene, and his name is John the Baptist.

John the Baptist, how does the New Testament describe him? Luke chapter 1, verse 17. He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, a

people prepared for the Lord's Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

[9 : 28] And for his entire adult ministry, John faithfully calls people to prepare for that greater one who's coming. Repent, he says, for the kingdom of God is at hand. I will baptize you with water, but there's one coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And just like Elijah, John the Baptist wasn't afraid to stand up to power. So in Matthew 14, he calls out King Herod for sleeping with his brother's wife, and it costs him his head.

And with his death, we ask, is this where the legacy of Elijah kind of abruptly ends? But it's not. Listen to Jesus explain the final, most significant fulfillment of Elijah's legacy.

Matthew 17, 10 to 13. The disciples asked Jesus, why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first, before the Messiah?

Jesus replied, to be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished.

[10 : 39] In the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood he was talking to them about John the Baptist. So Jesus says that the final and most significant fulfillment of Elijah's ministry is going to be through his suffering, through his death in our place on the cross.

Throughout our entire series in 1 and 2 Kings, we've repeatedly seen Elijah suffer for his faithfulness to God's word. He suffered exile. He suffered loneliness. Remember his spiritual depression.

He feared for his life almost daily. And yet Elijah continued to urge Israel to repent, even though many rejected him and his message. And in the same way John the Baptist ministered in the desert on the fringes of society, and he was calling Israel to repent, yet his message was rejected by many of the religious teachers and political powers.

He found himself depressed at times, ultimately alone in a prison until he was finally executed. And Jesus says that in the very same way as Elijah and John the Baptist, he will also suffer at the hands of religious leaders and political leaders.

So Elijah and John prepare us for the cross of Christ. And that cross demonstrates the seriousness of idolatry, of sin, and also demonstrates how a way is opened up for us to be reconciled with our Creator and Father God.

[12 : 13] Jesus the Messiah suffered, died, and was buried, but the story doesn't end there. He rose again from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father where he rules with power and authority.

And here, wonderfully, we get the final connection with our dear friend Elijah. Because Elijah is the only person in the Bible who goes up to heaven until we come to Jesus' ascension.

Acts chapter 1, verses 8 and 9. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. And when Jesus had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. So the Holy Spirit and the church is God's succession plan for the gospel message.

Jesus ascends, but he does not leave his disciples alone. Like Elisha, we carry the prophetic mantle to be the witnesses to the cross and resurrection of Jesus. A little later in Acts chapter 4, these same disciples, this is their message.

[13 : 29] This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. They recognized that they had been with Jesus. They'd been with Jesus.

We're called to be like Peter and John, Elijah, Elisha, common women and men, yet equipped by the word of the Lord and the Spirit's power to proclaim eternal life in Jesus alone.

So then chapter 2 divides evenly. And first, Elijah ascends. And then second, Elisha succeeds. Let's take a brief look at Elisha. So the narrator gives us three miracles in quick succession in verses 13 to 25 to confirm the Lord's hand is indeed upon Elisha.

The first miracle, verse 14. He took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and he struck the water saying, Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? And when he struck the water, the water was

parted to the one side and to the other.

[14:48] And Elisha went over. So Elisha performs the very same miracle that we just saw Elijah perform in parting the Jordan River. And he asks that key question, Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

Has the Lord left Israel without a voice? And the passage gives the answer, No, I'm still here. I'm still the living God who can withhold rain for three years and then send rain again.

I'm still the living God who is calling people by grace, men, women, and children, in every generation to be my chosen people. A righteous remnant that does not bow their knee to idols. And then the second miracle comes in verses 19 to 22. It takes place near Jericho. When the men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my Lord sees, but the water is bad, the land is unfruitful.

He said, Bring me a new bowl, put salt in it. So they brought it to him. And he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water from now on.

[15:52] Neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it. So the water has been healed to this day according to the word that Elisha spoke. And again, the location is really significant because Jericho was destroyed by Joshua in Joshua chapter 6 and a curse was placed on that land, on that ruined city, which we were reminded of in 1 Kings 16 at the beginning of our series.

But now the Lord is reversing that curse because his word brings life instead of death. And then the third miracle.

This is probably the most curious described in verse 23 to 24. Elisha went up from there to Bethel and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city jeered at him saying, Go up, you bald head.

Go up, you bald head. And he turned around and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord and two she-bears came out of the woods and tore 42 of the boys. Oh, this is actually James Wagner's favorite Bible story.

It might be my favorite Bible story in a few years too. Seriously though, this strange story is more about the seriousness of idolatry than about vindictiveness.

[17:13] Again, the location is key. So Bethel is this epicenter going back to King Jeroboam of golden calf idolatry. It's like an idol factory there in Bethel.

And Elisha's curse is an act of warfare similar to what Joshua did in cleansing the land. Leading God's people in purifying the land.

And the translation also, the translation small boys can be kind of misleading. We don't really know how old they were. The word can mean anything from about 13 to marriageable age to up to 30. So it's the same word incidentally used in Ruth chapter 2. The young men who were gleaning in the fields with Ruth, those are small boys as well. So it could be young men. And their jeering isn't really about Elisha's hair.

You remember how hairy Elijah was? He's described as being hairy. So they're kind of, they might be doing kind of a mocking thing where they're like, if you're bald and Elijah was hairy, you can't really be a prophet.

[18:16] You have to be kind of a hairy guy to be a prophet or something like that. But regardless of how they're mocking him, when you mock a prophet of the Lord, you're belittling God himself. And so the Lord actually protects Elisha here.

And he reminds idolaters in Bethel who the true God is and calls them to repentance. So Elijah ascends and Elisha succeeds.

And I encourage you to read the rest of two kings this week. There's some wonderful stories of Elisha there that we won't be able to talk about. This chapter is all about succession, as I said. The Lord is gracious to us in times of change. And he knows that there's a lot of anxiety. So he patiently draws us in for the sake of reminding us who he is.

Like a train station, he draws us in to stop for a moment and glimpse backwards to see his rescue plan unfolding. And then to look forwards in anticipation of the consummation yet to come.

[19:21] And Elijah and Elisha are witnesses to the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. And God knows that succession can be messy.

But Jesus doesn't leave us alone. No. He ascended to the Father and gives us his Holy Spirit. And by the power of the Spirit, we turn away from idols in our hearts.

And we share the hope of Christ with a lost world. Amen.