

Pentecost V (13C)  
*II Kings 2.1-15/ Galatians 5.13-26/ Luke 9.51-62*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
1 July 2007

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

~Paul H. Friesen~

We are as human beings, and as Christians, *complicated* when it comes to how we respond when people move in and out of our lives. Sometimes we are comical about it all—at the same time. It makes the inevitable truth about coming and going more bearable for a little while.

Often it's a child who sees the comedy about such continual changes. You likely have a child or know a child who has seen this comedy while in your company. Our youngest daughter sometimes sees it. Sometimes in her knee-slapping clown mood—and sometime in the sly, straight-faced mood in which our second daughter *carefully* makes statements she knows are ridiculous—outrageous.

She has been reviewing the story of her youthful travels this past week at dinner to the whole family very sweetly—but in a very loud voice, her only volume setting—about how she came from the hills of Guizhou province across the ocean in a plane with Mommy and Daddy to their home in Halifax. Then suddenly a few nights ago she said calmly in a rare moment of dinner silence, 'I want a new big sister.'

The three of us spun in our chairs and stared at her and sputtered, something like—'What will we do with the big sister we have?' Because she passionately loves and adores her big sister. But little sister's poker-face couldn't keep straight for long this time: she snorted and chortled and said: 'Give her away!'

The next evening at dinner we all pursued the comedy. To whom should we give the big sister she had? 'To the Billards,' she cheerfully said. Big sister quickly agreed to go because, she said, they had the most amazing number of backyard toys. But we pointed out that the Billards (across the street from us) already had three children between the ages of four and eight—so this was unlikely. And so we carried on for awhile, exploring possibilities. We finally agreed we would make Anya the middle sister and add a new big sister.

What are these sorts of moments all about? They are safe, comical opportunities to let us imagine the changes brought by our passage through life—learning to walk, and to talk, and what it would be like to

finish school and leave home, and move provinces or countries, and then to imagine watching the next generation do the same. We all need these moments to help us enter, positively, fruitfully, spiritually into the lives we have been given by God, lives as pilgrims. It is after all the kind of imagination that a nation should enter into, especially on its national holiday.

It is no mistake that the Creed repeats in a few words the biblical story of humanity, from creation to the New Jerusalem, when time shall be no more time—time, which always means a human journey from one place to another, whether or not we accept this truth.<sup>1</sup>

It is no mistake that the life of Christ, God incarnate in Jesus, is the centre of the creed in that long central paragraph; the life of Christ moving from conception to resurrection. And it is no mistake that Christians are meant to *follow* Christ—accepting, enjoying, fulfilling our journey through life.

We all know that life is a pilgrimage. Whether we think we are standing still or moving, we all grow, and we change, and the others around us grow and change. To be human is to experience change. To be Christian is to *embrace* it in the way commended to us by Christ, to *accept* the journey of the Saints who went before us, and the Saints who surround us now, and to enter into the journey ourselves.

This doesn't mean it is unnatural to want to capture moments and keep them like photographs, or to have a home that one can return to over the years. It doesn't mean it is un-spiritual to want to nestle into the unchanging, loving arms of Almighty God—the *Psalms* writers yearned for this often. In fact the spiritual masters of our Christian tradition said it was healthy to find the calm, un-changing centre for their lives in Christ. And we know that to live intelligently is to free ourselves from unnecessary turbulence and pointless change.

And yet to understand our lives as a journey, and to embrace that journey, delivers us from fear into the company of God—God who desires to walk *with* all his creatures, hand in hand along the paths we choose, and the paths we can't avoid.

We enter this week's Hebrew story as Elijah and Elisha—master and apprentice prophets—are walking from Gilgal to Bethel together.

They have arrived in the village of the prophets of the Lord, likely nearby the old stone circle, the shrine north of the town.<sup>2</sup> Gone are the days when Elijah, in deep depression, had fled King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and kept repeating to the Lord, in his mountain cave, 'I alone am left, and they are

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<sup>1</sup> The exiled prophet saw that 'the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it' (*Revelation* 21.22); the sun and the moon that were created 'for signs and for season and for days and years' (*Genesis* 1.14). All biblical quotations, unless noted, are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>2</sup> John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1964), p. 423-424

seeking my life, to take it away.’<sup>3</sup> Now there is a whole community, what the *Te Deum* had in mind, perhaps, with its line about ‘the goodly fellowship of the prophets’.<sup>4</sup>

Elijah and Elisha have arrived in the village, but in fact the walking never stops, and at every stage of the story the question is put to Elisha: ‘Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?’ And Elisha says, ‘I know, I know—but it won’t stop me walking with my master.’ Elijah himself tells Elisha, like Naomi tells Ruth, to turn back. But Elisha like Ruth refuses. Elisha continues because he knows that Elijah’s words are meant to save him grief. But both Elijah and Elisha know that there is no true way forward for Elisha, but to walk with him to Elijah’s final destination. Anything less wouldn’t do.

Soon a crowd of prophets follows at a distance as the two approach the river Jordan, which must be crossed. We have been prepared for it by this morning’s *psalm*: ‘I call to mind the mighty deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old...your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters.’

We are prepared for the crossing of Elijah and Elisha, but not just by this poetic memory of the Exodus of the Israelite slaves from Egypt. The whole story of humanity begins in *Genesis* with the story of God separating the skies from the seas, and the land from the water to make room for the pilgrimage of God’s children.<sup>5</sup> And it wasn’t just the Red sea that was crossed by the liberated slaves, but the River Jordan too.<sup>6</sup>

The stories of walking through the waters were the most powerful Hebrew stories possible, and the stories in fact that help us understand the resurrection of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

And so as Elijah and Elisha stand at the water’s edge the promise of all these stories stand behind them. They are entering a new land. And once they have crossed over Elisha finally says what he has waited to say for the whole journey: ‘Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.’

Elisha doesn’t want to stop Elijah from passing into the next world. Elisha wants to carry on the pilgrimage of the prophets so faithfully walked by his

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<sup>3</sup> *I Kings* 19.1-18

<sup>4</sup> In the English translation of the *Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC. 1962), p.8.

<sup>5</sup> *Genesis* 1.6-10

<sup>6</sup> *Exodus* 14.21-15.21; *Joshua* 3.7-17.

<sup>7</sup> This was recognized in the Christian Epistles and amongst the earliest Christian theologians. For a contemporary Jewish appreciation of the connection see Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians, Getting our Stories Straight: the Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985). Rabbi Goldberg served *Shar Shalom* synagogue in Halifax, briefly in the mid-2000s.

master Elijah. And how could he not meet Elijah's challenge—how could he not see Elijah depart!—he hadn't let Elijah out of his sight since the walk began, and chariots of fire are hard to miss. Elisha was ready, he didn't turn his face away, he wanted to take the next step forward.

And so Elisha is ready to tear apart his clothes and pick up Elijah's mantle, Elijah's cloak, and he does. It was the same mantle—do you remember?—with which Elijah had covered his own face as he waited for God in his mountain cave.<sup>8</sup>

It was the same mantle that Elijah had thrown over Elisha, in response to God's word on the mountain, to anoint Elisha as his successor.<sup>9</sup> It was the mantle Elijah had used to strike the water to make a path through the Jordan for he and Elisha, and the mantle Elisha used to strike the water so he could find his way back to the prophets without their master.

It is the mantle that we are meant to assume Elisha will now wear. 'When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.' As someone once put it: 'The cloak can work miracles *not* on its own, but only when [the cloak] is handled by the bearer of the Spirit.'<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the story Elijah is born into the presence of God in his fiery chariot, and we shall not meet him until August the 5<sup>th</sup> when we meet him on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus and Moses. But at the end of today's story Elisha has been commissioned to speak out in confidence words of God's love and justice. [Now if you follow the story just a bit further, you read that it is the other prophets who still want to find Elijah's body, who really can't take the next step. And they don't until they return from a fruitless three-day search for Elijah, and begin life with Elisha as their leader.]

It was enslaved Africans in America who understood this story so well and who created the many versions of that great song, 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.' They understood that life was a pilgrimage and longed for the next steps in a way that their very comfortable owners never could understand.

They were ready to ride with Elijah, to split the skies and gain an audience with God, the very thing Job in his misery talked about for forty chapters of his book.

But what about us—neither ancient Hebrews nor slaves? Perhaps the character we should have an eye right now is Elisha, the one left behind,

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<sup>8</sup> *I Kings* 19.13

<sup>9</sup> The story is told in *I Kings* 19.15-21.

<sup>10</sup> Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Anslem Hagedorn, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), p.235.

the one asked to take the next steps, to walk on in the absence of his beloved master.

Here the words of Jesus help us: 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' The Scriptures have much to say about the homeless poor, and much for us to do about it, but right here the Scriptures are talking about the life of the pilgrim. We know this because on either side of these words of Jesus are words about following Jesus. They are words about the life of the true pilgrim—in contrast to the spiritual life of one who waits for everything to be tidied up before taking the next step forward to follow Jesus.

This doesn't mean that in every possible decision facing us we are meant to jump! It doesn't mean that naturally cautious people are inferior to those that tend to be spiritually adventuresome or even reckless.

This means instead that life can't be understood for the Christian, for the Christian Church—for an Anglican parish—if we neglect the destination which guides us, if we neglect the destination which encourages us to lean forward to see the rising chariot, to pick up the fallen mantle.

Have you ever wondered why we couldn't be faithful Christians if we simply sat in our pews on a Sunday and simply *thought* about Jesus, *talked* about Jesus, *sang* about Jesus or—perhaps—*looked* at food on a table to help us to think and talk and sing about Jesus. Thank God these are all forms of worship. But why is it that we have for two thousand years *gathered* around a table, *opened* our hands, *eaten* bread, and *drunk* from a cup before *returning* to the pathways of our life? The Eucharist is a remarkably stubborn, remarkably important, deeply biblical habit.

Well, it's because what we call the sacrament is *an action*, not just *a thing* on a table—it's a matter of eating and drinking real food and drink together, of coming to the table and leaving it. This is what connects our spiritual life to the rest of our life. It's what helps us understand that faith is not just thinking or even behaving, but the active life of the pilgrim between two cities. This is not just the story of the Israelites and Moses, of Elijah and Elisha. It is the story of Jesus Christ, from cradle to grave, from cross to resurrection.

And so in the midst of our parish Eucharist, our parish thanksgiving this morning, we confess our sins, rejoice in Christ's triumph over death, and renew our lives as Christian pilgrims on the road to the New Jerusalem. Because none of has a home more important than the one we share, the one toward which we are walking. And the home to which we are going

shapes the choices we make about the journey, and the way we understand the steps of the journey we didn't choose.

Thanks be to God for those who have walked before us, but most of all for Christ, in the words of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*: 'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sins that cling so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Hebrews* 12.1-2