“***Was Carried Up***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, June 16, 2019

**2 Kings 2:1, 6–12**

1When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. . . . 6 Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. 7Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

9 When they had crossed, Elijah said “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” 10He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted; if not, it will not.” 11As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. 12Elisha cried out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” When he could no longer see him, Elisha grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

**Luke 24:49–52**

“See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” 50Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Elijah is one of the two people who did not die but were taken up to God. The other was Enoch, who “walked with God . . . . God took him” (Gen 5:22, 24; Hebrews 11:5).

Elijah and Elisha were Israelite heroes. They lived in the time of the monarchy. That’s about 400 years after Moses, about 150 years after David, 100 years before Isaiah of Jerusalem, about 850 years before Jesus.

They come early in the line of prophets, before the prophets who wrote books of the Bible, such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. They come at the height of competition between Yahweh and Baal, which was a political and economic competition as well as a religious one. The Yahwists (those who followed “the Lord”) did not believe in ownership, taxation, or sale of land. Yahweh actually owned the land. Baalism believed in ownership, heavy taxation, and grandiose wealth centralized in big cities. Governments such as Pheonicia, and even Judah and Israel taxed farmers heavily. If small farmers were unable to pay the taxes, their land would be seized and handed over to government-aligned landowners who, as Isaiah said, would “join house to house, add field to field” (5:8), or would “eat the flesh of my people,” to use Micah’s wording, “and chop them up like meat in a kettle” (Mic 3:3).

Elijah and Elisha were fierce combatants for Yahweh against Baal, and for the poor rural folk against the rich landowners and the capital cities. First and Second Kings describe their ongoing battles with the prophets of Baal. Elijah seems to have operated alone, and 1 Kings describes him winning many battles, but also having to flee for his life when Queen Jezebel sought to kill him. Elisha seems to have worked with his prophetic band, a company of fifty prophets, which is mentioned in the reading.

Elijah is a father-figure for Elisha, who follows Elijah around and begs for instruction. He swears that he will not leave Elijah, even when told to do so. He pleads for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, of his spiritual power, which Elijah says he will get if he sees Elijah’s departure, which has some mystery about it. Elisha is already getting power from his father-figure, but he seeks to get more, and it is presented as though it is a concrete, transferrable power, which can work miracles and change lives.

What about us? Do *we* get power from our fathers or our father-figures? If confidence and impulse control are secrets to personal power, then the answer is yes. Young men, in particular, benefit enormously from close interaction with a father figure. There are some obvious roles that a father figure fills, like being a pilot or trailblazer, a hero, and a defender. But there are some less obvious ones I can think of. A father is like a language teacher, a conversation guide, an engineer, and a humorist. He tells the young pupil of what he should be skeptical, and what loyalty means. You could add other things that you learned from *your* father, and perhaps from a father figure. Sometimes we may have been mistaught or misled by our fathers or father substitutes, but in this sermon I’m emphasizing the positive.

In the Bible stories, we can hardly doubt that Elisha benefitted from Elijah’s guidance and leadership. After the ascension of Elijah, Elisha’s prophetic career was characterized by danger and combat, but we would have to call it successful. He was a kingmaker, replacing the king of Israel with someone else, and performing more healings than Elijah did, apparently fulfilling the “double portion” part of the story.

But I want to go back to Elijah’s remarkable departure. He did not die, but was taken away to be with God. He knew this was coming, and he tried to be alone when it happened, but Elisha insisted on following and observing. Just as Elijah knew when it was time for him to be carried up, so Jesus knew when it was his time to ascend, although he needed no chariots of fire. After the Resurrection, he appeared to his disciples and apostles several times over 50 days, as recounted in three of the gospels (Matthew, Luke, and John). Only Luke narrates the ascension at the end of this period, which took place very quickly and without any fanfare. The same event is described at the beginning of Acts, the sequel written also by Luke (Acts 1:6–11).

Jesus lets them know that he is going to send them the Spirit of Truth, and he leads them out to Bethany, a village near Jerusalem, and blesses them. Then he is simply carried up into heaven.

They return to Jerusalem rejoicing, and it seems to be the next day that they receive the Spirit. Peter is moved to go out and preach to everyone in Jerusalem, as told in Acts 2, and it is the most effective sermon ever given. The people who hear it are “cut to the heart”; he tells them “repent and be baptized,” and three thousand people are added to the kingdom that day, Pentecost day (Acts 2:37–38, 41).

Our greatest leaders—Elijah in the time of the prophets and Jesus in the time of the great Messianic visitation—both knew when their time had come, and both were taken up into heaven. I thought it was important today mostly to tell the stories, to let the stories speak for themselves, rather than to over-interpret them. Everybody should know these stories, and ponder them, especially the one that ends with Jesus promising to send the Spirit, that same Spirit that we have in our lives today.

That Spirit is alive in us, waiting for us to tell our story, including stories about our fathers. And if you are a father, you have stories about your sons and daughters. As a believer, there are Bible stories that are so meaningful to you that they have become part of the storyofyour faith walk, a walk that *you* help to shape, as Elisha helped to shape his own destiny. So, what is *your* story, and what will your story *be*?