

ELIJAH AND THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

9/11/11 II Kings 2

Dean Feldmeyer

This morning we close the book on Elijah and his nemeses, Ahab and Jezebel. Today, the story comes to an end and I don't think I'm spoiling it for you to reveal that just about everyone dies.

But, as is always the case with biblical history, every ending is also a beginning. Every death is balanced by a birth. Every stop is followed by a start.

God's ultimate will, as we shall see, is not thwarted by death any more than it is thwarted by corrupt kings, evil queens, or burned out prophets.

God's will wins out.

So, to the story...

THE END

In about 858 BCE, King Ahab of Israel gave his daughter, Athalia, in marriage to Jehoram, the crown prince of Judah and the son of King Jehoshaphat.

This arranged marriage sealed a treaty between the two Hebrew countries, making them allies against foreign invaders and it was just in the nick of time because two years later, in about 856 BCE, Israel was invaded from the east by King Ben Hadad of Syria.

The two countries joined their armies together to repel Ben Hadad and were successful. At the battle of Golan Aphek, they routed the Syrian army and captured Ben Hadad. The custom would have normally been to imprison or execute a captured, invading king but he pleaded for his life and they spared him if he would promise to return to them any land that he had captured or taken in his invasion. He made the promise and was released.

Three years later, in 853 BCE, King Shalmaneser III of Assyria invaded Israel from the north and was turned back at the Battle of Qarqar by the combined armies of twelve kings who had united to resist him. Two of those twelve kings were Ahab and Jehoshaphat and, pumped up by their victory over Assyria, they turned east toward Syria and the Israelite border town of Ramoth-Gilead, which Syria had promised to leave after the war three years earlier but was still occupying.

The armies of Israel and Judah met the army of Syria on the plain near Ramoth-Gilead and, during the fight, Ahab was struck by a random arrow that pierced one of the joints in his armor. His soldiers tried to get him off the battlefield but the fighting was too fierce so he told them to prop him up in the chariot so his army could see him. There he remained throughout the battle. After the armies of Judah-Israel won the day it was discovered that Ahab had bled to death, his blood pooling on the floor of the chariot.

The army returned to the king's summer palace in Jezreel, where the funeral was held. When the blood was washed from his chariot it flowed into the streets and the dogs licked it up just as Elijah prophesied would happen.

Ahab is succeeded by his eldest son, Ahazia, and, here, we must stop for a brief explanatory footnote: Names can get a little confusing at this time in the story for the simple reason that king Ahab and king Jehoshaphat gave two of their sons the same names. Ahab's eldest son was Ahazia and his second eldest son was Jehoram. Jehoshaphat's eldest son was Jehoram and his second eldest son was Ahazia. See the problem?

So you're gonna have to pay close attention if you want to know what's going on, here.

Ahab is succeeded by his oldest son, Ahazia. But Ahazia rules for less than a year.

One day he is walking along the balcony of his palace he accidentally falls through the railing, off the balcony, and through some decorative latticework below. His back is broken and he is paralyzed by the fall. He sends messengers to a nearby Philistine shrine to ask the Philistine god, Baal-zebub (Yes, that's where we get the name Beelzebub) if he's going to die.

On their way they meet up with a "hairy man clothed in sack cloth" named Elijah who asks why they are seeking the word of a pagan god? Is there no god in Israel? Then he tells them to go tell their king that he is, indeed, going to die from his injuries.

They return with Elijah's pronouncement and Ahazia is so angry he sends 50 soldiers to find Elijah and kill him. Just as they find the old prophet, however, a bolt of lightning hits them and burns them all to death. Ahazia sends another fifty and the same thing happens to them. He sends a third fifty and before the lightning can strike the captain falls on his knees and asks Elijah for mercy, which he receives.

Elijah returns with the fifty soldiers to the palace of the king and tells Ahazia to his face that he's going to die, which he does within a couple of days.

Now Ahab's second son, Ahazia's brother, Jehoram, takes the throne.

THE DEATH OF ELIJAH

Right about here, the story changes and the focus shifts from the lives of the kings to those of the prophets, particularly those of Elijah and his protégé, Elisha.

The story of the death of Elijah is so fantastic that it has given him a special place in the lore of Judaism and Christianity and it has given our culture one of its most common metaphors. The phrase “passing the mantle,” which we use to describe the passing of authority from one person to another, comes from this story.

One day Elijah and Elisha are walking from Samaria to Bethel when Elijah says to Elisha, “You should stay here. God is sending me on an errand to Bethel.”

Elisha says, “Not on your life. I’m not letting you out of my sight.” (Peterson)

So when they get to Bethel the guild of prophets in that town comes out to greet them and some of them say to Elisha, “You know, the Lord is planning on taking Elijah, today.”

Elisha says, “Yeah, I know but let’s not spread that around.”

After a little while Elijah says to Elisha, “The Lord wants me to go to Jericho. You stay here.”

And, once again, Elisha says, “No way. I’m going with you.”

They get to Jericho and the same thing happens. The prophets come out to greet them and some of them pull Elisha aside and say, “Looks to us like God is going to take Elijah real soon, maybe today.”

Elijah says, “Yeah, I know, but let’s just keep that between us. Okay?”

After a little while, Elijah says to Elisha, “I just received word from the Lord. He wants me to go to the Jordan River. You stay here.”

“Again, with the ‘You stay here?’ Not a chance. I’m going with you.”

This time the prophets of Jericho follow them and, when they get to the Jordan River the prophets stand back and give them some privacy.

While Elijah and Elisha are standing on the bank of the river which is, presumably, high at this time of year, Elijah takes off his mantle or cloak and rolls it up and strikes the water with it. The water parts and they walk through, crossing the river without getting their feet wet.

Once they are on the other side Elijah says to Elisha, what can I do for you before I go? Name it.

Elisha thinks for a moment and then he says, “I want your life to be repeated in mine. I want to be a holy man just like you.”

Elijah responds, “That’s a tough one. But if you are watching when God takes me, it will be so. But you have to watch.”

Now, I turn the story over to Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the bible, called, *The Message*:

And so it happened. They were walking along and talking. Suddenly a chariot and horses of fire came between them and Elijah went up in a whirlwind to heaven. Elisha saw it all and shouted, “My father, my father! You – the chariot and cavalry of Israel!” When he could no longer see anything, he grabbed his robe and ripped it to pieces. Then he picked up Elijah’s cloak that had fallen from him, returned to the shore of the Jordan, and stood there. He took Elijah’s cloak – all that was left of Elijah! – and hit the river with it, saying, “Now where is the God of Elijah? Where is he?”

When he struck the water, the river divided and Elisha walked through.

The guild of prophets from Jericho saw the whole thing from where they were standing. They said, “The spirit of Elijah lives in Elisha.” They welcomed and honored him.

Most would assume from this story that Elijah was killed by a tornado (whirlwind). But, when his body was never found, the prophets assumed that he must have been taken directly into heaven and Elisha did not discourage this theory and that became the dominant story of Jewish prophetic lore. Elijah ascended directly into heaven without dying first – the only person in history to do so.

And because of that he has always been seen as the prophet who will return to usher in the “Day of the Lord” and/or to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. John the Baptizer intentionally dressed like Elijah such that some thought that he was Elijah returned from heaven. At the Jewish Seder, the meal that celebrates Passover, a place is always set at the table for Elijah and the door is always left unlocked just in case he returns during the meal.

The mantle has now been passed. Elisha is now God’s primary prophet to the king. The story of Elisha’s life as a prophet begins with several miracle stories which set him apart from his mentor who was a man of words. Linden will share some of these stories with you next week. But for now, we return to the kings.

THE RISE OF JEHU

In chapter 3 of II Kings we return to the story of Jehoram, Ahab and Jezebel’s second son, who is king in Israel and his nephew, Ahaziah, king of Judah. They are allies, of course, and word comes to them one day that the new king of Syria, Hazael, has crossed the frontier and retaken the city of Ramoth-Gilead – that same city that his father promised to give up, didn’t and then lost in the battle where Ahab was killed.

This time the battle goes even worse for the kings.

Jehoram receives several wounds and returns to Jezreel, the summer palace, to heal and his nephew, King Ahaziah, goes with him. They leave the battle in the hands of a very brave and capable general named Jehu. The battle

drags on and neither side is really all that enthusiastic about it but neither side knows how to end it, so that's when Elisha steps in.

Now, once again, we pause in the story because for this to make sense we have to think back a couple of years. Do you remember when Elijah was burned out and nearly suicidal, God took him to Mt. Sinai and gave him three tasks to do. One was to anoint Elisha to be his protégé and successor. One was to go to Syria and anoint a boy named Hazael to be the future king of that country. And the third was to find a guy named Jehu, who no one had ever heard of, and anoint him to be the future king of Israel.

The only one of the three tasks that Elijah did was the first one. He anointed Elisha to be his successor.

So, at this point, the other two tasks are yet to be completed. The second, to anoint Hazael as king of Syria, no longer needs to be done because he has already attained that lofty position.

All that is left is to anoint Jehu as the future king of Israel.

So Elisha goes to Jehu's tent one night and says to Jehu, "Thus says the Lord: You are the one who should be king of Israel. Make peace with Syria and turn your army around. Make for Jezreel now, while the king is weak."

And with those words, Jehu is pretty much anointed.

He turns the army around and tells them that he is now the king of Israel and they go along with him. He tells them to make their way to Jezreel and he takes off toward the city with a handful of riders.

Watchmen on the wall see him coming and know that it is him because he drives his chariot like a crazy man and they announce his arrival so Jehoram and Ahazia put on their kingly stuff and ride out to meet him. "So, how goes the war, Jehu? Is it peace?"

Jehu, with Elisha now riding by his side, snarls back, "How can there be peace when the house of Ahab and Jezebel still reign in Israel?"

The two kings realize that Jehu is declaring a revolution and take off back to Jezreel, riding hard. Jehoram doesn't make it, though. One of the men Jehu has brought along is his best archer. The archer lets fly an arrow which hits Jehoram between his shoulder blades and kills him. Jehu has his body thrown in the vegetable garden that used to be Naboth's vineyard.

Shortly thereafter, the army arrives and breeches the walls of Jezreel in less than a day. Ahazia is killed in the fighting. Jehu discovers that Jezebel is hiding in one of the towers of the city wall. He tells her servants that they can turn her over to him or die with her. A few minutes later her body comes flying out of the tower, hits the wall on the way down and is so mangled that she is virtually unrecognizable.

She lands in the very spot where Naboth was stoned to death and, after her body is removed, the stray dogs of the city lick up her blood from the paving stones, once again, fulfilling Elijah's prophecy.

Jehu cements his rule by having the entire family of Ahab and Jezebel, and even some of their friends, slaughtered – twelve of their sons are beheaded – so that none can lay claim to the throne and undermine his rule. Leading his army and riding hard in his chariot, he sweeps across the country of Israel, smashing shrines, executing anyone who challenges or might, someday, challenge his rule, beheading pagan priests and cleansing Israel of all pagan religion. (It is from his name that we get the phrase, "wild yahoo.")

The reign of YHWH in Israel has finally returned.

Unfortunately, as capable as Jehu was in the area of warfare and reform, he is just that incapable in the area of administration and rule. A kingdom born in that much blood and violence cannot long stand or produce anything of lasting good.

Jehu's twenty eight year reign and that of his son, Jehoahaz, would mark the lowest ebb in the history of Israel. By Jehu's death in 814 BC, the country had shrunk to half its size with Syria invading from the east and Assyria from the north. For the next 90 years of her life, Israel would be torn by rebellion and invasion and her final years would be filled with struggling simply to survive.

THE BEGINNING

During this time, while Israel struggles and sings her swan song, the story teller turns our attention south to Judah where the kings have progressed through natural succession, where worship of YHWH has been uninterrupted by paganism, and where peace has been the norm. Things have gone smoothly in Judah.

See, God's will is strangely like water. It always finds a way. If it cannot be done in Israel then it will be done in Judah. If it cannot be done in Judah then it will be done in the hearts of God's people, wherever they are.

God's will is not dependent upon human approval or effort.

It cannot be thwarted by wicked queens, corrupt kings, burned out prophets, overly zealous and violent reformers, or uncommitted, unfaithful lay people. Somehow, God's will always gets done.

If not through Ahab, then through Jehu. If not in Israel, then in Judah.

If not through us, then through others. If not here, somewhere else.

God, it turns out, does not need us.

It is we, who need God.

AMEN