

I.N.I.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 21, 2010

II Kings 2:1-12

In Christ Jesus, whose death and resurrection is the greatest comfort to all of us who someday will face death, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last Sunday we heard Elijah confront Ahab with his sin of going along with his wife's wicked scheme of putting Naboth to death. Elijah was a brave prophet. In fact Elijah has been called "the grandest and the most romantic character that Israel ever produced." His name means "My God is Jehovah." And he lived his name. He was a very faithful prophet of Jehovah.

One of Elijah's chief distinguishing marks was the mantle or cloak of sheepskin that he wore. He was a very bold and direct speaking prophet. He had a fierceness of zeal about him that allowed him to walk into death traps unafraid and unconcerned for his own welfare, simply doing what the LORD had commanded him. During his prophetic career he fought against the rampant idolatry of the golden calves, of Baal and Astaroth, plus ungodly rulers like King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. His was not an easy life. He endured loneliness and exile, hardships and persecution. But the end of his life was glorious. He went from this life to eternal life without passing through the valley of death.

The only other person we know of who passed into eternal life without going through the door of temporal death is Enoch, whom God took directly to heaven as recorded in Genesis 5:24.

From Elijah's glorious departure from this world we learn two wonderful truths that can be seen under this theme:

HOW THE CHILD OF GOD DEPARTS THIS LIFE!

I: PREPARED WITH FAITH, HAVING LIVED TO SERVE THE LORD

II: VICTORIOUS OVER DEATH, BEING ESCORTED TO HEAVENLY GLORY

When Elijah proclaimed God's anger and condemnation over against Israel's wickedness and idolatry, he was accused of being a troublemaker. He was hunted down as a fugitive. Jezebel swore to her gods that she would kill Elijah. Yet by Elijah's rebuking sin and pointing to the one true God, the LORD Jehovah had a saving effect upon many in Israel, so that the LORD told Elijah that there were yet 7,000 who were faithful to Him in Israel.

In our text this morning we read of Elijah's ministry as it draws to its close. Somehow God had revealed to both Elijah and Elisha, his assistant that the time had come for Elijah's work on earth to be done and for his departure from this earth. Elijah is about to be greatly honored by God. It appears he wanted to have this done privately, possibly in accordance with the humility he had taught, so he directs Elisha to stay in Gilgal, as he would go on to the school of the prophets at Bethel and bid goodbye to them. But Elisha insists with a solemn oath that he would not leave Elijah's side. Elisha repeats this vow again when he is directed to stay at Bethel and again in Jericho.

Elisha's desire to be with Elijah was not just mere curiosity or a morbid wish to see how it would all end for Elijah, but it was one of loving service to his dear friend and a sincere desire to receive from the LORD the same calling as Elijah's successor.

As the two of them made their way to the Jordan River 50 fellow prophets followed them and they saw a miraculous event take place. Elijah rolled up his mantle and struck the water. Immediately the water of the Jordan River divided and the two of them walked across on dry ground.

As Elijah and Elisha walked on the east side of the Jordan River, Elisha asked Elijah for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. This did not mean that Elisha wanted to be twice as great or twice as important as Elijah. He was requesting the share of the first-born son, who under Hebrew law would inherit twice as much as any other son thereby signifying him as the rightful heir. Although there were other prophets in Israel, Elisha had been called as Elijah's successor and by this request Elisha showed that he accepted this calling and prayed for the faith, strength and ability to fulfill it.

However this was not Elijah's to give, for this is a gift of the Holy Spirit. He alone can grant such spiritual gifts and He did as Elisha was an eye witness to Elijah's miraculous departure. Suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire came between the two men and Elijah was caught up in a whirlwind. The whirlwind carried Elijah away to heaven. Thus Elijah was transformed, glorified in the twinkling, the blink of an eye, instantly from a mortal body to immortal; from corruption to incorruption; from dishonor to glory; from weakness to power; from valiantly serving God in His physical kingdom to victory and eternal blessing in His heavenly kingdom.

What a glorious departure for the child of God. In the bodily ascension of Elijah into heaven we have a foretaste of heaven. A glimpse of the GLORY of perfection and holiness we will someday enjoy in eternity.

Elijah's departure into glory was because he was prepared with faith in his Lord and Savior. Few of us have the privilege of knowing as Elijah did, the precise time of our passing. Yet, our Lord reminds us continually in His Word that we are to be strangers and pilgrims on this earth; that we have no continuing city, no real home to call our own; that our real citizenship is in heaven. Continually we are encouraged to turn our eyes away from this dying, corrupt world toward the real world which is to come; away from the love of this temporary materialistic age to the eternal love of the Father in Christ Jesus. For then and only then can we be prepared at all times to meet our Lord either through death or in the clouds at His second coming.

Elijah was prepared with faith in the coming Messiah and he showed it by spending his life in service to the LORD. May this also be said of everyone of us. That does not mean we all have to become called workers like pastors and teachers; but all of us are called to work in God's kingdom as ministers, servants of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The reason the Lord has created us and given us life here on earth with our talents, time and treasures is to serve Him, to glorify His name. We serve Him also by serving others. Elijah did this in his office as prophet. You and I do it in whatever calling the Lord has led us into.

What is the reason we educate our children? Is it only for this life? Hardly! We educate them in all things they need in order to serve the Lord Jesus here on earth and to someday serve and reign with Him forever in heaven. The difference between a secular education and a religious one can be seen in these words: "The world believes that the purpose of education is to teach our children the grasp of certain skills and facts. In particular, those skills and facts which tend to be most profitable monetarily are preferred. The reason you learn to read and write is so that you can get a better job. The Christian view is quite different. In the Christian view your education is to lead you to know Christ through faith. You are to acquire wisdom in preference to knowledge. Knowledge—like learning to read—is a tool for acquiring wisdom. Worldly education stays on the temporal – what this can do for you now, or in the near future. Christian education stays on the eternal – what will you become forever?"

We all will have to face our departure some day. How sad if we have not learned about Jesus Christ and His Word—the true wisdom—to be ready to be taken from this world to the next.

Elijah in his ministry performed wondrous miracles. We read how he used his cloak to part the Jordan River. That cloak of Elijah represented the power of God, for it was God who performed

those miracles through Elijah. Elisha on his return used the same cloak and struck the Jordan and it parted again showing that the Holy Spirit had indeed imparted to him the spirit of Elijah. And what was that spirit: a faithful spirit, a God-serving spirit; a

DESIRE TO LIVE FOR THE LORD AND PROCLAIM HIS WORD.

That same spirit is given to us through the Word. We have the power of God right here in our hands; it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When the Good News of Jesus touches the human heart, a miraculous change occurs, a change from unbelief to faith, from despair to hope, from purposelessness to a meaningful life, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, from serving self to serving Christ. We too can perform miracles through His Word, miracles of conversion, of healing souls, of raising the spiritually dead, of transforming hearts, simply by proclaiming the Gospel.

When Elijah was being taken away in the whirlwind Elisha cried out **MY FATHER! MY FATHER! THE CHARIOT OF ISRAEL AND ITS HORSEMEN!** This was not a reference to the fiery chariot and fiery horses but to Elijah. Even as the chariots and horsemen were relied upon to defend, protect and save the country from its enemies so Elisha called Elijah the chariot of Israel and its horsemen. He was called upon by God to defend, protect and save the people with the Gospel message of salvation through the coming Messiah. God had used this chariot and horseman, Elijah, with His Word to defend His people and put away the worship of idols like Baal and Ashtoreth. May God continue to give us faithful pastors and teachers who are the chariots and horsemen of God's people Israel!

Are you a chariot and a horseman for God's kingdom? In the New Testament our Savior uses the term **SALT** and **LIGHTS**. We are the **SALT** of the earth that preserves others when we proclaim the message of salvation alone through Jesus Christ. We are the **LIGHTS** of the world that lead the way to salvation through the Gospel of full and free forgiveness through the crucified and risen Lord. We need to shine brightly in our daily lives. What good is a light that is burned out? What good is salt if it has lost its saltiness or preserving ability? What good is a chariot and its horsemen if it is running in retreat or not moving into battle to defend and attack the enemy? Having been brought to faith by God's grace, we are left in this world for a time, just like Elijah, to do what he did--proclaim the Word of God and the wonderful salvation through Jesus.

Our own society is very comparable to Elijah's. Many of our leaders have a form of godliness but are immoral in their words and actions. Our world is filled with idols made of chrome, steel, green paper, investments and a thousand other things. We have gross immorality that seeps right into our homes through our TV's and D.V.D.'s. Children may not be sacrificed to Baal, but they are to the convenience of abortion, the cruelty of child abuse or lack of a Christian upbringing and they are spiritually sacrificed to the godless humanists of our day who promote "meism" and the belief that man is the measure of all things, and therefore we can earn our own way to eternal glory.

Our real enemies, just like Israel's, are not those of other nations, but they are right here within our own borders and within our own bodies. Our own sinful flesh, our selfish heart that wants only what's in it for me. We are surrounded by a godless society that preaches daily, do your own thing, live only for yourself, live by your own morals and priorities, make your own rules, you are really the only one that matters. Our only defense is the continuing proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the power of God unto salvation.

And soon the world will see us no more. Like Elijah, we will be taken to our heavenly home. But until then we too need to be the chariots and horsemen of Israel, the Church of God, both in our homes, in our church and in our society.

The Lord through Paul says this about us, **BEING CONFIDENT OF THIS VERY THING,**

THAT HE WHO HAS BEGUN A GOOD WORK IN YOU WILL COMPLETE IT UNTIL THE DAY OF JESUS CHRIST.

The departure of Elijah was a painful loss for Elisha, but a glorious gain for Elijah. So it is with every Christian's death. It is a painful loss for the Christian brothers and sisters left behind to carry on with the work of the Lord, but what a glorious blessing it is for the one who has died in Christ. When we close our eyes in the sleep of death, after a life of serving our God with a repentant heart of faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, the angels of heaven will carry our souls to our heavenly home, and on that last great day of the resurrection our bodies will be raised, glorified and be perfect just like Christ's and Elijah's.

We all must face our departure some day—either by a peaceful death, illness or accident. When we do, let us face it remembering what Jesus has done for us and what He has promised us—a resurrection from the dead. That is our sure and certain assurance. Because He lives we shall live also. His resurrection guarantees our resurrection from the dead. We will rise and be reunited with our bodies and be taken to be with the Lord forever, just like Elijah. All this is certain for those who belong to Christ. As he told us, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Therefore, let us look to Him as we approach our deaths; there is no other way to be ready for our departure.

As your pastor, my fervent prayer for everyone of you is that you too, like Elijah, are prepared for your departure with a repentant, faithful heart which shows in your life of service to your Lord. Then in death you too, will depart victorious over death and be escorted by the heavenly hosts in eternal glory. That is the ultimate goal of every child of God, attainable alone through Jesus. Praise God!

Amen.