

2 Kings 2:1-12 The Chariot of Fire
February 11, 2024

The life of Elijah the prophet has always captured the imagination of the faithful. It has been featured in sermons and Sunday School lessons, and even portrayed in movies such as, “The Sins of Jezebel,” back in 1953. It inspired classical music like Mendelssohn’s, “Oratorio.”

His story is found in seven biblical chapters between 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 2. There is no book associated with him in the bible, but of all the other prophets who do have their names on books, he is the one later associated with John the Baptist, and he is the one Jesus meets along with Moses at the Mount of Transfiguration.

The 9th century BCE (that is, the 800s) was a time of turbulence and trouble in the young nation of Israel. It was the time of a series of more or less apostate kings, the most notorious of which was Ahab, who along with his wife Jezebel, rose the nation to its highest heights, and set it on the path to its doom.

Ahab had instituted the worship of BAAL alongside the worship of the Lord. Most all of Elijah’s life-events involved some kind of confrontation with the royal couple, over the issue. He was the hitch in their get-a-long, the thorn in their flesh. Ahab complained that Elijah never once prophesied anything good about him, and it was true;

He said that there would be no rain in Israel for three years and escaped to a place east of the Jordan and stayed there with a widow in a town called Zarepath, and where she was provided with oil and flour, and when her son died, Elijah restored him to life.

There was the confrontation on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Baal who couldn’t get the fire of their altar to light. “Elijah went before the people and said, ‘how long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal is God, follow him.’” And then he had them douse his sacrifice with water so that when the Lord lit the flame they would know that they had met the living God.

Then, in one of the unsettling moments of the Old Testament, after he had killed the Baal prophets, Jezebel pronounced a death sentence on him and he fled up into the mountains in the south, where he spent the night in a cave and received a vision in the middle of a powerful storm, with a great wind.

“ . . . the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.” The Lord told him to return.

Later, after, at Jezebel’s bidding, Ahab had murdered a man named Naboth so that he could take his vineyard, Elijah once again spoke against the king; “I have found

you, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the Lord.” And he predicted the fall of Ahab and said that dogs would devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.

Elijah’s was a grand life, with thunder and lightning and fire from heaven. He was one of the few prophets of YHWH who made their prophecies with integrity, so that in the end, we read how in glory he was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire, almost like Enoch who did not die, but walked with God . . .

For most people, most of the time, life is boring by comparison, and mundane. Great and glorious scenes are rare and the best we can do is manufacture them, in rather cheap imitations called the Grammy’s or the Oscar’s, or the Super Bowl, which come and go with such regularity that perhaps more than anything else, they reveal the common human thirst for the magnificent, the desire to see the glory of God.

They are, along with political and military events, and technological inventions, about the best people can do in the field of glory, and most of the time they let us down, because they are not the real thing. We are doomed to repeat them over and over because they have no lasting affect.

There are two sides to religious life that must be given sufficient attention. Two of the words we sometimes use to refer to them are, “transcendence,” and, “immanence.” Transcendence means that which is above, high up, maybe even beyond knowing.

Transcendence means there is such a thing as, “that which is bigger than we are,” before which we should be silent.

Immanence means down-to-earth everyday mud and muck reality. The relationship between the two means that the God who is above, is also present with us in life’s experiences. One without the other presents a distorted picture of God, of ourselves, and of the world.

It is the “spirit of the age” to deny everything beyond the everyday material world. As a matter of fact, the philosophy of materialism denies any sense of transcendence, or else associates it with the splendor of nature or the highest human accomplishments, which are not really transcendent at all.

The example of Ahab and Jezebel stands out. In the biblical tradition they are villains, but it is the nature of their villainy that is striking. They are presented as powerful and effective, as well as selfish, cruel, and merciless.

They created an atmosphere in which all their prophets (whether of YHWH or BAAL) were expected to tell them what they wanted to hear and present them to the people of the nation in a positive light, rather than speak the truth to them.

Elijah was not willing to go along with that program. Neither, by the way, was Micaiah and another unnamed prophet as well. You can read about them at

the end of 1st Kings. Elisha, was called to replace Elijah as a prophet of the Lord, and held Elijah in high regard, and was able to handle his high calling, at least in part, because of the moment he witnessed, when Elijah was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last before the beginning of the season of Lent (notice I got it right this time). It presents Peter, James, and John having a similar experience with Jesus, replete with splendor, high and lifted up, accompanied by Moses and Elijah, at the approach of his descent into the real world realities of the religious and political life of the world, which would sweep him up like Jezebel did the Lord's prophets over 800 years before.

In any case, today is a day of transcendence. We are here, in this place, surrounded by the faith of those who came before us and who worshipped here, and left this room in which to worship. We have sung hymns, and prayed prayers, and read scripture, that is meant to lift us up for a few moments out of everyday life for a glimpse of God's glory, even if it is only a glimpse. It only takes a glimpse.

From this moment we are given strength and guidance, and the will to live faithfully, and with the kind of integrity shown by Elijah, not perfect, to be sure, but strong and true; and in humility to present ourselves to God, creator of the world, redeemer of lost souls, and sustaining power of life in every moment and every place.

Always remembering that the coming together of God's transcendent glory and immanent presence is Jesus lifted up on Good Friday. Take this chance to soak it in. It is hard for us to see, but by God's grace not impossible, the fiery chariot that takes us to our true home.

[Back](#)[Home](#)