

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, June 26, 2016)

Texts:

**2 Kings 2:1-14** (*The Voice*) (Done as a dramatic sketch for our worship service.)

Elijah and Elisha were leaving Gilgal when the Eternal One planned to snatch Elijah up into the heavens by *the power of* a fierce dancing wind.

Elijah (*to Elisha*): I ask you to remain here. The Eternal has commanded me to go all the way to Bethel.

Elisha: As certain as your own life and the life of the Eternal, I refuse to abandon you.

So the two men traveled down to Bethel together, where Elisha was approached by the prophets' disciples who lived there.

Prophets' Disciples: Are you aware that the Eternal One is going to snatch *Elijah*, your mentor, away from you today?

Elisha: Yes, I am aware *of this*. *I want you to keep quiet* about it.

Elijah (*to Elisha*): I beg you to remain here. The Eternal has commanded me to travel to Jericho.

Elisha: As certain as your own life and the life of the Eternal, I refuse to abandon you.

The two men then traveled to Jericho together, where the prophets' disciples living in Jericho approached Elisha.

Prophets' Disciples: Are you aware that the Eternal One is going to snatch your mentor away from you today?

Elisha: Yes, I am aware *of this*. *I want you to keep quiet* about it.

Elijah (*to Elisha*): I beg you to remain here. The Eternal One has commanded me to travel to the *Jordan River*.

Elisha: As certain as your own life and the life of the Eternal, I refuse to abandon you.

So the two men then traveled *to the Jordan River* together.

While Elijah and Elisha were standing near the Jordan *River*, 50 of the prophets' disciples *from that area* stood at a distance from them on the other side. Elijah removed his cloak and rolled it up; then he struck the water with it, and the water divided. Elijah and Elisha then walked across on dry land. After the two had made it to the other side *of the Jordan*, Elijah spoke to Elisha.

Elijah: Tell me what it is you would like me to do for you before I am taken away from you.

Elisha: Please, I wish to receive a double portion of your spirit. *As your successor, I want to have twice the portion of your power.*

Elijah: What you have requested of me is challenging, but it will be done if you witness my departure. But if you do not watch, then you will not have your double portion.

Now as the two continued walking along and talking *as they normally did, something incredible happened*. A blazing chariot pulled by blazing horses *stormed down from the heavens and* came between Elijah and Elisha. Then Elijah was swept up into heaven by the *fiery* storm. Elisha witnessed this *amazing spectacle*.

Elisha: My father, O my father! The chariots and riders of Israel!

Elijah and Enoch ([Genesis 5:24](#)) are the only two men in the Bible to leave earth while they are still alive. Although they are separated by centuries of time, both men are inseparable from God, and both leave quite a legacy: Elijah's successor, Elisha, continues his mentor's work, even calling out Elijah's name for help. Enoch's son, Methuselah, lives longer than anyone else ever has, which is proof that he, too, lives properly.

Elisha never saw Elijah again. Elisha grabbed the clothes he was wearing, and he ripped them in half. He picked up Elijah's cloak, which had dropped *to the ground when he was taken up into heaven*, and then he went back to the Jordan riverbank and stood. He struck the water with the cloak.

Elisha: Where is the Eternal One? Where is Elijah's True God?

After Elisha struck the water, the *Jordan River* divided, *just as when Elijah had struck the waters*. Elisha then walked across *on dry land*.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"A New Mantle"**

And yet another DRAMATIC story pulled from the pages of the Hebrew testament. Fiery chariots, a whirlwind, the heavens opening up; a mantle dropped from the sky and beat against the water making it divide.

And in the midst of it all, a rather whiny protégé either admirably loyal or tremendously terrified or, most likely, both, making his way across the desert sands to the Jordan river with the one who has guided him, taught him, assured him, encouraged him, and now lets him know that he must go on alone, literally picking up the mantle that has been assigned to him.

*(As Elisha)* “But, wait, it’s not time!” you can feel the younger Elisha thinking. “I need more. I’m not ready. I need to have a heaping helping of your hospitality – a double share of your spirit – if I’m going to make it on my own without you to follow.”

And, here’s one of the most interesting parts of the story – Father Elijah – the one who has reached full mastery and is ready now to ascend to the next level of enlightenment says, “okay. It won’t be easy, but if you SEE me as I ascend you will get the double blessing, and if you do not, you won’t.” What the \*\* does THAT mean?

But Elisha agrees, and watches as long as he can see the master and then flies into a state worthy of a good Dynasty rerun, as he rips his own clothes in two, picks up Elijah’s mantle and strikes the water with it, creating yet another rerun –this one from Cecil B. Demille and Charlton Heston – as we watch the water parting down the middle and allowing Elisha to cross over. Wow.

A whirlwind, a chariot, a master ascending, a river parting and an apprentice crossing over into his own destiny. Sounds a lot like life, doesn’t it?

For what could describe any of the truly dramatic moments in our lives – those times when we are called to move from one way of being into another, to take up the mantle of knowledge, spirit and faith – better than, “a whirlwind experience.”

What more wondrous way to illustrate the feeling we have when someone we have loved, followed, admired and learned from is taken from us, whether we’re ready or not, than a blast of fire as they ride away in some spectacular conveyance?

Here in the story before us today, I think God is teaching us many things that can help us as we move across the desert sands and stand beside the lonely rivers in our own lives.

For who among us doesn’t know the desire to stay close to those we love? Who among us doesn’t know that fear that comes from being on our own or having to chart a solitary course without the direct guidance and instruction of one we trust and care for? And many of us have certainly known what it is to have our rock, our teacher, our loved one taken from us before we feel it’s time for them to go.

But here in our story today, I think God is affirming that we can go on. No matter what the circumstance, no matter what the loss, no matter how others are treating us, we have our own path to follow and we will be given the strength to go forward. As long as we’re willing to step out of our cage of fear and accept the NEW that God has for us, that is. As long as we are willing to watch and accept that we are in a different place now that our teacher is no longer on this plane. As long as we can let go of who we THOUGHT we were and see ourselves as complete and whole and guided by God into new ways of being and thinking and moving through this world as we go forward to meet new people and encounter new experiences / with God and the mantle of the one we loved watching over us and covering us wherever we go.

“Elisha’s request [for a double portion of spirit] invites us on a daily basis to ask “What great thing will you do in my life today, God?” and “What great thing will I do today, O God?” Dr. Bruce Epperly writes in his own exploration of this story. “Expecting great things from God does not diminish our power or responsibilities, it increases them – in a world where God asks – and needs us – to be

companions in healing the earth one act at a time. In an open-system universe in which the future is partly left up to us, we can expect great things from God and great things from ourselves," he writes.

What great new thing is God calling you into in your own life? It could be as simple as planting a tree to help heal our environment or it could be as major as selling your house of 55 years and moving into a whole new environment where you have no idea what's really in store for you.

"Today's scripture asserts that God's realm promises great things, and asks us to be persistent and focused in our quest to be faithful;" Dr. Epperly writes. "We may have to let go of familiar relationships and comforts to awaken to the wonders God has in store for us."

In her commentary this week, our UCC theologian, Rev. Kate Matthews, looks at Haywood Barringer Spangler's connection with this text and the African American spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," with "the chariot and the whirlwind [representing] divine support and deliverance [as well as] God's empowerment of believers for ministry in the world." Spangler," she writes, "urges us to discern God's will in our own lives, so that we might live faithfully, "embracing the suspense or ambiguity that is part of life" even as we ask, "What is God calling me to do in this situation?" [And] like Elisha, we may have to take action in order to find out the answer to that question."

I know what it is to be an Elisha. To wonder how in the world I can accomplish something or go forward without the love and guidance of the ones who loved me and trained me in the ways of Christ.

How well I remember over 29 years ago last month when I came to California from Virginia and had to start making a life for myself without the advice, and security and help of my family and the community I was so close to. Suddenly, I literally had only one friend and mentor by my side, and when she herself had to go back to Virginia three months after I got here, I was so bereft I fell to the curb in tears as her station wagon pulled away, inconsolable as I wondered how in the world I would ever make it on my own or without the advice and guidance of my trusted mentor and friend.

But, you know what? I did. In fact, I can see from that point in time how my life really took off and started me on the course that would eventually bring me here as your pastor. Did I see that then? No way. Did I think about getting in a car and following my mentor back east? You bet. But I knew somewhere in my being that God was directing me on another path and would always be with me even if I didn't have a mantle to beat against the pool water in my new apartment complex and cross over into my new campground called LIFE.

Chart your new course. Know that God is with you. Be assured that the cloak of love that covered the one who went before you rests on you now, giving you the power to go forward, and giving you the encouragement to believe and to face whatever it is that God has in store for you ahead.

### **"A Psalm of Life" (opening stanzas)**

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,  
Life is but an empty dream!  
For the soul is dead that slumbers,  
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!  
And the grave is not its goal;  
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,  
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,  
Is our destined end or way;  
But to act, that each to-morrow  
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,  
And our hearts, though stout and brave,  
Still, like muffled drums, are beating  
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,  
In the bivouac of Life,  
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!  
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!  
Let the dead Past bury its dead!  
Act,— act in the living Present!  
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

AMEN.