

Elijah's coming departure was not what you would call a "best kept secret." He tries to give Elisha the slip, but Elisha sticks to him like a bill collector on payday. The sons of the prophets, Elijah's biggest fans through whom the Spirit of God sometimes moved in powerful ways, behave like groupies following along behind in an ever-increasing crowd, all the while saying to Elisha, "*Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?*" And he answered, "*Yes, I know; be silent.*"¹ But they kept asking so it doesn't appear they got the hint.

The word was out that Elijah was on the move, but when the moment came, it took their breath away: *2 Kings 2:11 (NRSV) As 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.*

Well, you don't see that every day! Elijah's departure brings to mind Professor Dumbledore's escape from the Ministry of Magic, in particular from Cornelius Fudge, in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*; as the Ministry moves in, Dumbledore takes hold of his phoenix Fawkes and disappears in fire and smoke. As his would-be arresters rise to their feet, one of them, Kingsley Shacklebolt says, "You have to give it to him Minister; Dumbledore's got style!"

A chariot of fire and horses of fire, ascending into heaven in a whirlwind, we have to give it to him; Elijah's got style!

That's nice, but what difference does that make? What do we do with this passage and passages in the Bible like it that have so much style it's hard to imagine what the substance could be?

We let this passage and those like it be our teacher. We follow behind like Elisha and those sons of the prophets of old and learn to see this world differently. We take up the mantle of Elijah.

☞ "*The Chariots of Israel and Its Horsemen*"

You don't see exits like Elijah's every day, but there are some similarities that are worth noting; similarities that suggest that this most unusual event is in fact very much par for the Biblical course. The style points to the substance.

Elijah's ministry continually points the people of God back to Moses; that is Elijah's message; his substance is simply this – trust in God, be faithful to the covenant that God has made with you.

Thus, the transition from Elijah to Elisha parallels the transition from Moses to Joshua. The great men (Moses and Elijah) both meet mysterious ends: No one knows where Moses was buried, and since Elijah was taken away in a whirlwind, no one knows if Elijah was buried. Both transitions occur on the far side of the Jordan, in the wilderness, beyond the Promised Land. Both transitions involve the Jordan River parting and the faithful crossing on dry land. Both transitions

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (2 Ki 2:5). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

feature the vision of the Promised Land as the home of the people of God being cast by the one and fulfilled by the other. Moses and Elijah saw that vision as if it was real; it was so real to them that the friction between vision and reality set them on fire; they passed the torch on to Joshua and Elisha, who in turn picked up the mantle and lived the vision into reality.

If at this point, you are saying to yourself, “wasn’t it Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and wasn’t there a lot of razzle dazzle then too?” You are taking the essential next step. The Biblical witness runs from Moses through Elijah to Jesus, who said to us, *John 14:1–3 (NRSV) “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.* The Covenant God Who keeps His end of the bargain takes our place and keeps it for us so that the vision can be fulfilled: The people of God living in peace in the Promised Land.

Moses and Elijah and Jesus saw that vision clearly; it was so real to them that the friction between vision and reality set them ablaze; Joshua saw it too, and the Jordan River parted, the walls of Jericho fell, and the distance between vision and reality closed. Elisha saw it, and the Jordan River parted, the dynasty of Ahab and Jezebel fell, and the distance between vision and reality closed. Jesus saw it, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two, Jerusalem and Rome both fell (and many other empires and Reich’s as well), and the distance between vision and reality closed.

The capacity to see that vision as reality is what the chariot of fire and the horses of fire symbolize. Pharaoh had chariots; Moses had God; who won? Ahab had chariots (he’ll soon die in one); Elijah had God; who won? Pilate had chariots; Jesus had God; who won? Who changed the world for the better?

You don’t see exits like Elijah’s every day. He had style! Style that points to substance: The vision of this world as a promised land in which the people of God live as people *of God*; people who keep the covenant, who live by faith in the God they know to be faithful. This vision runs through the Bible from Genesis to the maps; it runs from Abraham (the father of the faith) to Moses to Elijah to Jesus; let it run through you; see beyond sight to insight, to new vision of what will be: a Promised Land of peace in which we live by faith, hope, and love, a promise that God is even now in the process of keeping. The friction between that vision and reality will set you ablaze; and, through eyes of faith, you will see “the chariots of Israel and its horsemen”.

The Mantle of Elijah

Eric Liddell was one who saw “the chariots of Israel and its horseman;” he saw the friction between the vision of what God intends for this world and the way it is. He encountered that

friction when he chose to not run in the 100 meter finals in the 1924 Olympics because it was held on the Sabbath.

For us, today, the Sabbath is no big deal, but in Liddell's time it was a hot button issue every bit as controversial as abortion and gay rights are today. The minutes of the General Assembly are as full of reports about the Sabbath as they are about any other issue.

Liddell chose not to run; he picked up "the mantle of Elijah" and live in the light of God's way for this world rather than conforming to the way it is.

We know his story from the movie "Chariots of Fire," but there is more to his story. He went on to be a missionary in China, and when the Japanese invaded, he was imprisoned in a concentration camp in which he died. Contemporary accounts report that he brought great comfort and encouragement to his fellow prisoners.

Moses saw a vision of God's way for this world and passed it on to Joshua; Elijah saw it and passed it on to Elisha; Jesus saw it and passed it on to His Church, to you and to me. They each offer us a glimpse of salvation; that's what this vision portrays; what will the world be like when our deliverance from the power of sin, evil and death shifts from what we're longing for but is "not yet" to what we've longed for and is now? What will it be like to live when we no longer have to live by faith but can finally live by sight?

What a day that will be! But that is not today; today we live by faith; today we have a covenant with God to keep; we keep it by living as citizens of the Promised Land in this land. We keep it by taking up the mantle of Elijah and in ways large and small (and don't ever discount the power of those small ways!) we make the vision of salvation a reality in this world. To be sure, that is a goal that is always beyond us, the kingdom of God (yet another Biblical name for this vision) will come as God's gift to us, and yet in the words of The Great Ends of the Church, we are called to "[exhibit] the Kingdom of God to the world." To this world, which God loves so much that God went one step farther than Abraham and gave God's only Son, so that whoever believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Elisha picked up the mantle of Elijah and discovered a spiritual power he had never known; the power to make a difference, and he did! Joshua saw those Jericho walls come a tumbalin' down, and wow! What a difference he made!

As I listened to our music team preparing our special music, I wondered why they chose to call the movie about Eric Liddell, "Chariots of Fire." I assumed it was from this passage; I hoped so, but thanks to Wikipedia, I learned it came from the poem "Jerusalem" by the 19th century poet William Blake:

And did those feet in ancient time.
Walk upon Englands mountains green:

And was the holy Lamb of God,
On Englands pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land

Beneath the poem Blake inscribed an excerpt from the Bible: "Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets": Numbers chapter 11, verse 29.²

What difference can you make? Where does the friction between the vision of salvation, of life in a Promised Land, of the kingdom of God, where does the friction between the vision and the world in which you live create sparks? Fan that flame! Be on the lookout for "*the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!*" Join God in making the vision a reality! The work isn't done until the kingdom comes; until that great day, do your part. Keep the covenant. Take up the mantle of Elijah. Amen.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/And_did_those_feet_in_ancient_time