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Ascension Day: 2 Kings 2 & Ephesians 4:1-17

May 21, 2020



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Elijah's Ascension, Elisha's Pentecost. The ascended Christ gives gifts to men.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings 2. Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. And Elijah said to Elisha, Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel. But Elisha said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.

So they went down to Bethel. And the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you? And he said, Yes, I know it. Keep quiet.

Elijah said to him, Elisha, please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to Jericho. But he said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. So they came to Jericho.

The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, Do you

know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you? And he answered, Yes, I know it. Keep quiet. Then Elijah said to him, Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.

But he said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.

Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water. And the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.

And Elisha said, Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me. And he said, You have asked a hard thing. Yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you.

But if you do not see me, it shall not be so. And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

And Elisha saw it and he cried, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

And he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water, saying, Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other. And Elisha went over.

Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them, they said, The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. And they came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. And they said to him, Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men.

Please let them go and seek your master. It may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley. And he said, You shall not send.

But when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send. They sent there for fifty men. And for three days they sought him, but did not find him.

And they came back to him while he was staying at Jericho. And he said to them, Did I not say to you, Do not go? Now the men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant. And as my Lord sees, but the water is bad and the land is unfruitful.

He said, Bring me a new bowl and put salt in it. So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water.

From now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it. So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke. He went up from there to Bethel.

And while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, Go up, you bald head! Go up, you bald head! And he turned around. And when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys.

From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria. 2 Kings chapter 2 is a passage that describes the transition from the ministry of Elijah to that of Elisha. Elisha was called back in 1 Kings chapter 19, but we haven't seen anything of him again until this point.

The chapter begins by telling us that Elijah is about to be taken up by God into heaven by a whirlwind, and this seems to be widely known. It seems to be known to Elijah, to Elisha, and to a number of the sons of the prophets. And the account of this chapter begins with a series of three journeys.

Elijah asks Elisha on three occasions to stay behind. But yet on each of the three occasions, Elisha insists on following him, as he's going to Bethel, as he's going to Jericho, and then to the Jordan. Sandwiched between these requests from Elijah, Elisha is also asked by the sons of the prophets at Bethel and at Jericho if he is aware that the Lord is going to take his master up from him.

And the repeated requests from Elijah and questions from the sons of the prophets raises this sense of anticipation we're arriving at a significant point. The presence of the sons of the prophets here is actually surprising. They're not characters that we've really seen much to this point.

But now suddenly there seem to be a lot more faithful Israelites around. The ministry of Elijah seems to be a very lonely one. He's very much a solitary figure.

But when we move into the ministry of Elisha, there seem to be a lot more other characters around. The journey they take is from Gilgal, to Bethel, to Jericho, and then to the Jordan River. This is almost doubling back on themselves, as Gilgal is nearer to the Jordan than Bethel is.

Each of these places is closely associated with Joshua's conquest of the land. It's as if Elijah is rewinding the conquest narrative. And then the narrative will be taken up again and moved forward by Elisha.

Elijah's ascension is also Elisha's Pentecost. As he is taken up into heaven, his spirit will be given to Elisha and Elisha will continue his ministry. Elisha is told that he will receive the first born portion of Elijah's spirit, the double portion, if he sees Elijah as he's being taken up.

It seems to be that this is some sort of visionary event. There are a number of events within the story of Elijah and Elisha where only those with the eyes to see can see. And we see these things in the Gospel too.

Something like the baptism of Christ and the heavens being opened. We shouldn't necessarily expect that that would have been visible to everyone. Rather it's seen and presented as a visionary event that John the Baptist and Jesus see, whereas not every bystander would have seen that.

Elisha's ability to see this, in some sense, is a qualification for his ministry. It sets him apart as someone who has that spiritual perception. And as Elijah is taken up, he's taken up by the chariots of God.

And Elisha proclaims, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen. And this presumably is a statement about Elijah himself. It's not just describing what he's seeing.

Later on in chapter 13 verse 14 of this book, Elisha himself is described in this way. As Joash, the king of Israel, goes down to him and weeps before him, crying, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. Elisha is the chariot of the Lord and Elijah is the chariot of the Lord.

There are two water crossings here which remind us perhaps of Moses' water crossing, leading the people out of Egypt, and Joshua's leading the people into the promised land. One is going out of the land and the other is going in. Now these occur by means of, in the first case, Moses' rod that separates the waters of the Red Sea.

Then the entrance through the Jordan into the promised land is by means of the feet of the Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant. And here it's the mantle of Elijah is the means by which the waters are split. And perhaps we're supposed to see Elijah as a sort of human rod and also a bearer of God's presence.

This might explain the meaning of the reference to Elijah as the chariot of Israel. The chariots of fire are God's own throne chariot by which Elijah is taken up to God's presence, presumably to the divine council. And the chariot could also be compared to the Ark of the Covenant.

The Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant are like the horsemen carrying the chariot of Israel as they go into the land and they are led by their ruler. Now Elijah is here described as a sort of chariot, as one who is connected with this presence of God among

his people. And the way that it's the mantle that is used this time, a garment that's associated with a person, not a rod, not the Ark of the Covenant, but a mantle associated with a person, suggests that there's a more intimate dwelling of God with and in his people, particularly in the character of Elijah and then his successor Elisha.

Elijah and Moses have a number of similarities. Both of them have strained deaths or burials. In Deuteronomy chapter 34 verse 5 and 6 we read, So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab according to the word of the Lord, and he buried him in the valley of the land of Moab opposite Baal Peor.

But no one knows the place of his burial to this day. This might make us think of the struggle the 50 men have in finding where Elijah has been deposited by the chariots of fire. Both Elisha and Joshua take up the reins of leadership on the banks of the Jordan, the far side of the Jordan.

And they're both closely associated with the spirit of their master and have a father-son relationship with the one that preceded them. In Numbers chapter 27 verse 18 following we read, So the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him. Make him stand before Eliezer the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight.

You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. And then in Deuteronomy chapter 34 verse 9, And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the Lord had commanded Moses.

In Numbers chapter 13 verse 16 we see that Moses had renamed Joshua, formerly he had been called Hosea. So he seems to play a father role in relationship to Joshua. The double portion is the firstborn son portion as I've already mentioned.

We see this in Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 17. Moses and Joshua share a single two stage mission, the father and the firstborn son. And the same thing is true of Elijah and Elisha.

In chapter 19 of 1 Kings, Elijah is given a mission and he doesn't actually complete that mission. The mission is completed by Elisha, his successor. He only performs the first part.

Elijah performs 8 miracles and Elisha performs 16. You can maybe think there's another sense of the double portion. Elisha is a doubling of the ministry of Elijah.

If Elijah led Elisha to the far side of the Jordan in order to ascend into heaven, Elisha begins by moving the opposite direction. It's a re-entry of the land, a replaying of the pattern of Joshua. And that connection between Joshua and Elisha is a very important one.

Elisha begins by healing the waters of Jericho. Waters that had formerly led to death and miscarriage are healed of their former problems. Rather than death, Elisha brings life.

There are a number of former events that this might remind us of and also with which it can be contrasted. The ministry of Joshua begins, among other things, with the destruction of Jericho. And now Jericho, which had formerly been a place of destruction, is made a place of life.

Another thing it might recall are the waters of Marah in the wilderness. After they had crossed the Red Sea, they reached these waters and they're bitter and they're healed by Moses. However, although Moses healed waters in the wilderness, now we see Elisha healing waters in the land.

Elisha also amplifies Elijah's actions in various ways. We've seen this in the fact that he performs 16 miracles to Elijah's eight. Elijah raises the widow's son, but Elisha raises the Shunammite's son.

Also by contrast, Elijah begins by pronouncing a lack of water, a drought, and Elisha begins by providing water. We might also see some connections between chapters 1 and 2 of 1 Kings. In chapter 1, three sets of 50 strong men are sent to seek for Elijah.

And in this chapter, 50 strong men seek Elijah for three days. There seems to be some sort of parallel. I'm not sure what to make of it, but it seems to invite our attention.

Perhaps the number 50 is intended to make us think of military arrangements. So in chapter 1, there are three units of military men, 50s, that are sent to seek for Elijah. And in chapter 2, there are another set of 50 men.

There are 50 men mentioned twice. And there it seems that they are people who are, as it were, a military numbering, but now they're sons of the prophets. Israel went out of Egypt in groups of 50s and entered into the promised land in groups of 50s.

It's a military numbering. And here we have a new conquest and now a new group of 50 at the beginning of it. God defeats the armies of the enemy and now raises an army of his own in order to lead that conquest.

This might be part of the meaning. The passage ends with a rather troubling incident as 42 boys or young men are killed by bears as a result of Elijah's curse. Perhaps the first thing to note here is that we shouldn't necessarily presume that these were young children.

We see the same word used to refer to Ephraim and Manasseh when they were in their early 20s and the same word used to refer to Joseph when he was 17. So they may have been in their late teens, they may have been in their early 20s. In chapter 14 of Genesis, young men are going out to fight with Abraham.

So these should not just be presumed to be young kids. Others have raised the possibility that the word here may be referring to subordinates, young men who are serving under higher officials. The event occurs at Bethel which is the site of Jeroboam I's golden carved shrine.

And this may suggest that they're not just kids but maybe they're Levites or assistants who serve at the idolatrous shrine. Elijah's curse is a sort of act of warfare. He's beginning this Joshua-like conquest of the land and beginning it with attack upon a centre of idolatry.

So he's moving on from healing the waters of Jericho, that first site of conquest, moving into the land, he's going to Bethel which is associated with Ai, and he's retracing the path of the conquest of Joshua as he's doing so. Peter Lighthouse has suggested that the mockery of the young men is specifically directed against Elisha because of the taking up of Elijah. They're saying, ascend, ascend to where your master is, you know where you can go Elisha.

And saying, you baldhead, what's the point of that? Is it just ridiculing his physical appearance or is it saying that Elijah, the man who's associated with her in the previous chapter and elsewhere, has been taken from over him? And as a result he's a baldhead. And so their ridiculing of him may be very targeted at his mission, his calling, God's purpose that's being achieved through Elijah and Elisha. And as they ridicule Elisha they are suggesting that they have the upper hand now, these people associated with the shrine of Bethel perhaps, that they are the ones that are coming out on top.

They may have been scared of Elijah but he's gone and now who cares about Elisha? He's no threat at all and can be lightly ridiculed. They are attacked by two she-bears and there are 42 of them who are killed. It's an interesting number because in chapter 10 verse 14 of the book Jehu kills 42 relatives of Ahaziah of Judah who come to visit the royal princes and the sons of the queen mother.

And Elisha's judgement upon the 42 lads seems to foreshadow the judgement upon the Amorite dynasty of Ahab and all related to it both in the north and in the southern kingdom. That parallel between Jehu and Elisha might also draw our minds back to chapter 19 of 1st Kings where their ministries of destroying the opponents of the Lord are directly related to each other. A question to consider, the ministries of Elijah and Elisha and the relationship between the two provides a very helpful framework within which to consider the ministry of Christ as it relates to the ministry of John the Baptist and also the ministry of Christ as it relates to the ministry of the church.

What are some of the ways in which you can see this being played out within the New Testament? Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1 to 17. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace

was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's call.

Therefore it says, In saying he ascended, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. In the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians, Paul presents the remarkable scope of the Gospel. It starts at the dawn of history, it reaches its climax at the end of the age, it goes from the depths of the grave to the heights of heaven, it overcomes the alienation of man from God and the enmity and division between man and man.

It's a great mystery, now revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious Gospel. And in chapter 4, Paul speaks more directly about what this means for the life of the Church. He describes himself as a prisoner, but a prisoner in the Lord.

He wears his bondage as if a badge of honour. The physical constraints of human captivity placed upon him are spoken of in terms of his spiritual bond service to Christ. He may be in prison, but he's in prison because he is captive to Christ.

He then turns to address Christian practice in the light of the awe-inspiring reality of the Gospel that he's declared. We must live a life worthy of such a calling, act in a manner befitting of such a Gospel. The calling isn't just the Gospel in some objective sense, it's the fact that we have been made part of this story by God's grace.

God has called us, he has elected us. We find ourselves in the middle of history, at the centre of God's purpose, a plan that has been intended from the beginning of all history, and now it is coming to fruition, in part, through us. And in response to this, we must be characterised by complete humility, by gentleness, by patience, and by bearing with one another.

Humility is a virtue that would not have been seen as such by many within the ancient world, but humility is the only fitting response to the scale of the gift that we have been given. We're called to gentleness. Gentleness is not prone to wrath, it's not prone to

violence, it's merciful, it's without jealousy, it is without malice and cruelty, it's kind.

In the same way, we're called to patience. Patience requires mastery of your spirit, the ability to endure, to be persevering, to hope. We bear with each other in love.

It's a posture that we take towards each other, it's informed by the previous virtues, it's gracious, it's not vaunting over others. It believes the best of others, it's hopeful for others, it's long-suffering with other people, it avoids censoriousness and condemnation. And all of this is informed with love.

We desire the best for each other and we commit ourselves to practical service and care for each other. The focus of this section is on unity. The source of the unity that we have is the spirit, and the shape of that unity is a bond of peace.

This bond of peace is held together by the spiritual virtues that Paul has just described. And in speaking of the bond of peace, Paul is suggesting that the way of peace has a power to hold people together. It is a bond, it's a glue.

Paul now lists various facets of the unity of the spirit. One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. There are three sets here when you break it down, and they can be arranged in a Trinitarian manner.

The first one, the one body arises from the one spirit, who grounds its unity in the one bond that he forms. The spirit is the down payment, and as such is also the one who guarantees the one hope of our calling. The second one is the oneness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That corresponds to the oneness of the faith that has him as its object, an exemplar. And it's the oneness of the baptism in his name. We are baptised into his name, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, baptised into Christ.

And then the third one is the unity of the Father. The oneness of the Father establishes the unity of all creation under him, and as the realm of his presence and his providence. But we can say more.

Implicitly, Paul's argument depends upon the oneness of these three. One God in three persons. The final verse of this section connects the theme of unity with the theme of comprehensiveness that has been prominent throughout the Gospel.

God is over all, and through all, and in all. And from unity Paul moves to discussion of the diversity of Christ's gifts. Here he gives a rather loose quotation of Psalm 68 verse 18, and shows how it can be related to Christ and his work.

You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there. The Psalm speaks

of the Lord's ascension from Mount Sinai to reign, perhaps through the story of the Exodus, as he goes up into the land and reigns from Mount Zion. Here it's related to Christ's ascension in triumph.

Christ has won the victory and goes up to the throne in power, with captives in his train. He gives gifts as a sign of his enthronement. The same notion that gifts are a proof of enthronement is expressed by Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost.

To ascend, Christ had to first descend to the lower regions. This refers not, I believe, to Sheol, but to the earth itself. The earth over against heaven.

Christ first descended from heaven, and then he ascended. And in his descent and ascent, Christ moves through the entire order of reality, gathering it together in himself, uniting it. Christ is, we might say, Jacob's ladder.

He is the conduit uniting heaven and earth. He is the one that holds everything together. Christ's gifts take the form of ministries to his church.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers. These ministries are focused upon teaching, which instill the principles of true growth. Now elsewhere there are similar statements that are made.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians 12, verses 4-6. In that statement, there is a sort of Trinitarian structure again. The gifts and their variety come from the Spirit.

The services and their variety comes from the Lord. And the activities and their variety come from God, the Father. Here the focus is especially upon the services connected to the unity and the gift of Christ.

Apostles, prophets and evangelists primarily minister to the wider church and serve as founding ministries. Shepherds and teachers, meanwhile, are ministers to more specific congregations, guarding and instructing them. There is some sort of a hierarchy here, a movement down from the head to the body, establishing the sort of hierarchy that renders a body an ordered body.

However, these forms of service, while representing the authority of the head, are ministering to and for the sake of the body so that it might be established, that it might grow and flourish. And the purpose of these ministries is to equip the saints for their own activity. The whole church is to grow into maturity, not through the ministry of just a few members, but through its united work, through which the gift of Christ in the ministers has equipped it.

Growing in such a way will lead to the unity of the faith. Faith is united. There is one faith.

And division is a sign of the church falling short in maturity or failing on account of sin. Divisions in the church are a sign that something has gone wrong. That doesn't mean that divisions are wrong.

The unity is not found in the church as it currently exists. The unity is ultimately situated in Christ. And the more that we are conformed to him, the more that we will know unity.

However, our lives are much admixed with error, with alien principles of society and other things that prevent us from arriving at the unity of the faith. It should lead to the knowledge of the Son of God. He is the one true object of our faith.

And the more that we grow in that knowledge, the more that we will find unity with everyone else who is growing in that knowledge. This leads to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Christ is the standard.

We are being conformed to Christ through the ministries of the Spirit that he has given us. Part of the intent of this is that we might be children no longer. God doesn't want us to be thrown to and fro by false teaching and by deception.

We should have the wisdom, the clarity of understanding, the settled will that enables us to be fixed and determined in our pursuit of the truth, no longer so susceptible to deception. We speak the truth in love. And these are the two criteria of unity.

Unity is found in the truth. Unlike lies, truth has a unity to it. Truth is one.

And the more that our lives are lived under the truth, the more that we will find that we have unity with other people who are living their lives in such a manner. Love as well is another principle of unity. It's an expression of the communion of the Spirit.

Any approach to union that does not hold both of these criteria or any approach that pits one against the other or tries to subdue one to the other, must be rejected. We need both truth and love. And we will also find in the final analysis that these things are one too.

If you are not acting in love, then you are not acting in truth. If you are not acting in truth, you are not acting in love. We must grow into the head, who is Christ.

This growth occurs through the united work of the body. The joints here may be the ministers given to the Church by Christ, with each part being the members of the Church more generally. The ministers given by Christ play critical roles but every single member must be involved.

Paul fuses architectural and organic imagery here. He speaks of a body being built up. And elsewhere, earlier on, he has used the language of a building being grown.

In verses 19-22 of chapter 2 In whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows

into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. There is one gift of the Spirit, but there are manifold and diverse gifts of the Spirit.

The unity of the Church is found in the one Spirit, but the practical realisation of this unity is found in the re-presentation of the one gift, in the manifold giving of our individual gifts of the Spirit in love. The unity of the Church then is not found in a gift that is given directly down and the Church has no activity relative to it and it is given to everyone in an undifferentiated manner. Rather, the unity of the Church is found in the way that God has equipped us to be participants in his giving process.

He has given us the Spirit, but he has given us the Spirit in such a way that he has given us the Spirit to give. And so each one of us has a measure of the Spirit that we might minister to others, that we might be means by which God gives to others. What we have received of the Spirit is not for our own sake alone, it's for the sake of everyone else.

This helps us to understand why Paul speaks of the body being built up by itself. The gift comes from Christ, the Ascended Lord, but it comes to us in a way that comes through the gifts of other members of the body. The unity of the Church requires the manifoldness of the Church.

Paul's doctrine of the Church arises out of the Ascension of Christ. The Ascended Christ gives the Spirit by which he forms his body in which he, as the head in heaven, is connected to his people on earth. As Christ ascends, the Spirit descends and becomes the means by which Christ fills all things and gathers all things under his rule.

It is because Christ has ascended that he can fill all things. A question to consider. An important theme in this passage is maturity.

How might we see the Ascension itself in terms of this theme?