

# *The Whirlwind*

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February 15, 2015

2 Kings 2:1-12

*Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "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. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." Elijah said to him, "Elisha, 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 company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." Then Elijah said to him, "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 company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." 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. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.*

## I.

Have you ever had a day like this: a day when you woke up one person, but you went to bed another one, because something occurred so profound, or so shaking, or so strange, that it totally changed your way of looking at the world? I have had some days like that. A few of those days have taken place in the mountains; some of them have taken place with friends. Others have been in the presence of God alone. Close your eyes for a moment and try to remember a day when you woke up one person, and you went to bed forever changed.

Religious experience of the personal variety is a risky thing to talk about in our society! You start talking in your office or place of business sometime about the times when you have been in the presence of God! Try sharing about a visionary encounter with Jesus, out loud!

People tend to think you want to convert them...or tend to assume you are just a little strange. They may assume you are psychologically suspect!

Still and all, each of us is capable of religious experiences- just not all in the same way. For some it is a matter of the heart, for some the mind—for some, a body thing. Each of us is capable of perceiving the presence of the sacred. Each of us is capable of being made new, not just once, but over time. Each of us. There are life experiences that change our entire way of looking at things! There are moments in our lives that blow open all our predilections and presuppositions. There are days that start one way and end another, days when we look back and realize that a lifetime has taken place between dawn and dusk.

We read in the book of Kings today of a faith experience, a holy moment beyond what most of us can imagine. What a moving story—as Elisha travels along with his mentor Elijah, and goes with him as far as Elijah will let him go, then presses him to go a little further. First Elijah tries to get him to turn back at the Jordan River—but Elisha will not turn back. Then Elijah parts the waters with his rolled up mantle—his blanket. On the other side, he asks his faithful servant Elisha what he might do for him, before he is snatched away. “Allow me to inherit a double share of your spirit,” Elisha says to him. It isn’t long after that as these two extraordinary people are walking along together, talking, some strange fire—a chariot of fire, and horses of fire says the writer of Kings—a strange and holy fire separates them...Elisha calls out: “Father, father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” In a moment, Elijah is with him no more, snatched away by the whirlwind. All that is left is the mantle of Elijah. Elisha tears off his own cloak, tears it in two. He picks up the mantle of Elijah, and he strikes the waters of the river. And the waters part...

## II.

We may never climb a high mountain or walk in the desert with a prophet. We may numb our minds with routines, and steep our imaginations in conventional words and pictures. But there is a divine power that has a way of breaking into our boxes and breaking us out of our imprisoned minds. There is a whirlwind loose in our world that has a way of setting us free, whether we are ready or not. There is a burning wind that is from God—it can break out in our souls, burn in our bones, compel us to action, call us from half life to full lives, lives of prayer, lives of decision. There is a whirlwind yet capable of picking us up, moving us, transforming us.

The experiences that break into our closed worlds and set us free are not every day experiences. They may happen only once in a lifetime for some of us—or they happen a little bit at a time for others—over the course of a lifetime. There is no one right way for God to speak to all human beings, no one right tradition, no single correct experience of the holy, the divine. The whirlwind of God catches us where it will, and it catches each of us differently. Yet we know when we are caught up in the sacred, because we are not the same people afterwards as we were before. And whether we have had one such day or one hundred, we treasure the memories, because the whirlwind sets us free.

Sometimes a holy experience comes to us around loss. This story of Elijah and Elisha has always meant a world to me—at least ever since I was twenty, when my Grandpa, Jack Carman, a retired missionary and physician, died. I had never had to deal with the death of someone so close before. My grandfather had taught me how to swing a scythe to take down tall grass. He had taught me how to build a campfire. But more than that- through his ceaseless labor as a missionary physician, his labor of love with people great and small, he had taught me the meaning of ministry. He might even have taught me the meaning of friendship.

When I was a teenager my grandfather gave me a special gift he had received but a few years before. Invited by tribal people, the Nagas, in northeast India, to be an observer trusted by both sides in peace negotiations, in an attempt to reach a ceasefire with the Indian government and between warring factions, he had received a handmade blanket—a “friendship blanket.” One Christmas in the early 1970’s he put it on his grandson’s shoulders—a sign of friendship and trust.

We had walked a lot and talked a lot, my grandfather and I. And then inch by inch, he was taken away—not by a wall of fire, but by the inexorable creeping progress of dementia and cancer.

Have you ever had grief so severe that you had to get away? I remember going for a fast walk in the woods one day, to be alone, unable to get my grandfather’s death off my mind—just a month or so after he finally died. I couldn’t make sense of it; it felt like my world had collapsed. It was in the forest behind my college campus that day that I came to terms with the reality that my grandfather wasn’t around to be my exemplar any more, my guide, my hero. But my grandfather had never set out to be a hero! He was just responding to his sense of what God wanted him to be and do. He had never set out to be a healer or peacemaker: he just was trying to follow Jesus.

As I walked a little slower in the woods that day, it became clear. It was time—time to grow up, time to pick up the pieces, time to respond to the call of the same God who had taken this good man from youth in South Carolina to young adulthood in New York State to India and back again. I knew that my call wasn’t his call. But I knew that there was something that had fallen that needed to be picked up again, Call it the mantle of ministry, or the robe of love, call it what you want. There was no fire when my grandfather was taken from us—not for me. I didn’t even feel a high wind. And yet there was a sense of weight being lifted from the shoulders: there was no fire but the sparks of a call kindled in my bones. There were no chariots or horses in heaven but there was light and clarity in the soul. It was time.

### III.

Try on this idea for size: we live in a world that has a desperate need, a deep hunger, for something holy. Violence and indifference often seem to rule the day. Despite the practiced cynicism, we live among people who are thirsty for a drop of something sacred. And we also live in the presence of a God fully as capable as ever of transfiguring lives. We live in the shadow of an amazing cloud, from which a voice may sound, saying that each of us is a beloved daughter or son of the One who brought the universe into being. The chariots of fire still appear,

smoldering quietly at the edge of our field of vision or blazing down upon us full force to tear us from our security blankets and leave us to pick up the mantle of God's justice and peace instead. The whirlwind will still arise, leaving a cloak, a blanket in need of picking up, a calling yet to be taken on.

God is still capable of giving meaning to your life and to mine! God is still capable of overcoming the routine, burning through the pain, wiping away the fear, breaking the shackles, with a love so extreme, so utterly giving, that it demands our very lives. It calls us out of the ordinary and into the light, it compels us to live differently.

It is Sunday morning at Emmanuel Friedens Church. Another ordinary Sunday morning. But with us there can be no more ordinary mornings, no more routine days. Because we have been claimed by the wind of God. We have seen the world through new eyes, and in the process, we too have been made into something new. We have beheld a love so profound that we can scarcely catch our breath. We have been bathed in holy light. And we will never be the same again. Because each of us can discover, in the reflected light of *our* fiery encounters with the holy, that we too are the beloved of God—and that we too have a calling, we too are compelled by the whirlwind, we too have a mantle to pick up, and take as our own.