

Chariot of fire: 2 Kings 2:1-12

by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

Elijah, the great prophet who has traveled the length of Israel and spoken the word of the Lord directly to Israel's king, is now about to take the longest journey of all. Somehow he knows that his time has come. His disciple Elisha knows too, but they do not speak of it. Instead, Elijah turns to Elisha and says, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel."

Elisha will hear none of it. He vows, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they go down to Bethel together, with the unspoken reality of impending death accompanying them.

When they reach Bethel, the prophets of that city can see the reality that follows Elijah like a shadow. They take Elisha aside and ask if he knows. He replies, "Yes, I know; keep silent." The reality of what lies ahead may be inescapable, but let it remain unnamed. Some realities seem too large and too powerful to be named.

As Elijah heads out for Jericho, he again asks Elisha not to go with him, and again the disciple vows that he will not leave the master. The prophets of Jericho ask, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?"

Does Elisha know? Does one know when one's heart is breaking? If only he could forget for just a moment! "Yes, I know," he replies, "but be silent."

Perhaps Elijah wants to spare his young disciple the pain of good-bye. Or perhaps Elijah wants to spare himself. Again Elijah says, "Elisha, stay here," and again, in what has become a familiar dance between the two, Elisha vows not to leave Elijah.

When they reach the Jordan there are more prophets, but they do not take Elisha aside. Instead they keep their distance, perhaps seeing that there is nothing more to be said. When the two men reach the banks of the Jordan, Elijah takes his mantle, rolls it up like a towel and snaps it at the water. The water parts so that they can cross to the other side. There they find themselves alone, and Elijah says, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you."

Elisha must have been tossed into a whirlwind of possible responses: “What do I need? I need to know how I can carry on. I need to know how I can be a prophet, when everything I know I learned from you and you are about to leave. I need to know how to be a leader, because all I know is how to follow. I need to know what to say when people turn to listen to the prophet of the Lord . . . and they mean me! I need you to stay.”

What Elisha ends up saying is, “Please leave me a double dose of your spirit.” Elisha assumes that he is half the man Elijah is and that he will need twice his master’s spirit just to break even.

Then Elijah says a curious thing: “If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not it will not.” What could he possibly mean by that? It is only later that Elisha will know.

As they continue to walk and talk together, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separates the two men. Then a whirlwind gathers up Elijah and lifts him like a child being thrown in the air by his father. Elisha, protecting his eyes from the churning sand, shouts into the wind, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horseman.” When he can no longer see Elijah and the wind has stilled to a whisper, Elisha tears his shirt in two in the traditional expression of grief.

Elijah had said that if Elisha saw him go he would inherit his spirit in double measure. Now it is clear why that was essential. If Elisha had not seen this, he would still be looking for Elijah, and thinking of him as living. Seeing Elijah leave was like seeing the dead body of a loved one—it helped bring home the reality. Seeing the master go made it clear that now it was up to Elisha. The spirit he so admired in another now resided in him.

When I was in my late 20s I was installed as senior minister of First Congregational Church in Burlington, Vermont. My mother came up for the service alone because my father had died a few weeks before. He had been scheduled to preach the sermon at the service. My father had always been the towering presence in my life. Even though I chafed at the suggestion that I had gone into the ministry “to follow in my father’s footsteps,” I knew that they were large footsteps and wondered if I would be able to live up to the standard of faithfulness and effectiveness he had embodied.

My mother brought me one of my father's pulpit gowns, thinking I might want to wear it for the service. I loved my father and missed him dearly, but I hesitated to wear his robe. I was sure it wouldn't fit or that somehow I was not yet fit to wear it. I felt like the understudy called to center stage before all the lines are learned.

Nevertheless, I tried on the gown. The sleeves were too long, as was the gown—I had to lift up the hem to walk because otherwise I would have fallen on my face. But in other ways it felt right, as perhaps my mother had known all along. It was my way of seeing my father go and realizing that his spirit had been granted to me, perhaps even in double measure.