

The prophet Elijah may be best known for the way he was taken up into a whirlwind in a fiery chariot. Elijah was a mentor to Elisha, and that mentoring relationship reminds us that mentors are important in passing on skills and leadership for us all – and for helping us define our own vision. A few of the story's images and ideas appear in the 1981 movie "Chariots of Fire".

Who has been important in your life?

Who has helped you prepare for what you do – the skills for your work -
or simply the skills for living? Who has been a guide to you – shared their wisdom?

I am thinking of the mentors in our lives -
and how they sometimes help us define our own visions for our lives.

What is a mentor?

A mentor is often a trusted friend - sometimes a counselor or teacher -
an individual with some experience we admire and something to teach us.

Sometimes mentoring is a formal relationship - sometimes informal.



The reading today is about mentoring.

Elijah is a mentor for Elisha.

The thing people remember the most about Elijah is when he is taken up in the whirlwind.

He does not die. He just goes up in the air with this chariot.

We set a place for him at the Seder table at Passover – because you never know.



Elijah was always trying to call the people of Israel back to their destiny -
back to being Yahweh's people – and acting like Yahweh's people.

The time of our story today is another one of those times
that the writers say that Israel was being unfaithful.

That is never anything new.

Elijah works miracles – he confronts King Ahab – he calls fire down from heaven -
even influences a military victory.

Then, he runs to a cave for protection
when he fears that King Ahab and Queen Jezbel will retaliate.

He has defeated them and their pagan gods in battle.

We did not read it today but -

there is the well known passage about God speaking to Elijah
in a still small voice while he was in that cave. (1 Kings 19:13)

Elijah wraps his face in his mantle
and goes out and stands in the entrance of the cave - trying to listen to the still small voice.

Elijah is also described as a runner for God – as he traveled to so many places.
This may be how the 1981 movie about the runners came to be called *Chariots of Fire*.

So, that is a little about Elijah.



Elijah meets Elisha while Elisha is plowing a field.

Elijah goes and throws his garment over him. The garment is called a mantle.

A mantle is a kind of vest – a loose fitting, sleeveless garment.

The mantle represents Elijah's power – his authority – as a prophet.
We sometimes use the term – “take up the mantle” – when someone assumes authority.

It's time for Elijah to go now – but Elisha fights it.

He insists on going to Bethel and he insists on going to Jericho.

When they are at the Jordan River -

Elijah takes his mantle that I just described - rolls it up - strikes the water with it.
The water divides this way and that – and Elijah and Elisha cross over to dry to ground.



Surely there is a reason why it's hard for Elisha to let go.

Surely there are questions like – “What do I need?

I need to know how I can carry on. I need to know how to be a prophet.

Everything I have learned I have learned from you and you are about to leave.

I need to know how to be a leader.”

Elisha asks for Elijah's spirit – a double portion of it.

So Elisha is asking to be his heir - or successor.

Elijah's reply is: “You have asked a hard thing.

Elijah is telling his protégé that it will ultimately be up to God
whether Elisha carries forth the spirit.

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It is time to say goodbye – and sometimes that is hard.
And - it's time for Elisha to take his own authority in the way that is his own.

Have you ever avoided saying goodbye to someone important
because you did not know how?
You did not have the words – to affirm that the relationship had been important?

I know that I have.

Sometimes we look for ways to criticize – to downplay a relationship -
rather than to admit its importance – it may be too emotional.
Elijah needed to say goodbye – but not just yet – you get the feeling.

Maybe Elijah had to make his exit dramatic.

Well – he sure did. What a way to go!

Maybe that is what it took

for Elisha to understand it was time for him to take up his mantle -
take up his own authority – do it his way.



Elisha did succeed Elijah.

And Elisha served the needs of the people around him - but in a very different way.

Elijah had confronted the idolatry he saw.

But he was violent and thought he represented a violent God.

Elisha was different – a more compassionate prophet.

He gives us a different way to think about the nature of God.

Listen to this:

When the Syrian raiders came down to attack Israel -

Elisha prayed to the Lord
to strike the enemy with blindness -
so that they could be diverted away.

When danger was over Elisha prayed for their healing.

When the king of Israel asked him whether or not to kill their enemy his answer was,
"You shall not kill them.

Would you kill those whom you have taken captive with your sword and your bow?
Set food and water before them so they may eat and drink and go to their master.

Then he prepared a great feast for them -
and after they ate and drank –
he sent them away and they went to their master.
So the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel. (2 Kings 6:18-23).

The writers of the Old Testament seem to be moving
toward a more compassionate way to be -
a changing way to understand the divine – and perhaps our place in it all?

Even in these old stories – we see people changing
and we see the character of the divine changing.



The story stretches our imaginations today. Surely it did when it was first written.
But – it is worthy. It is worthy because of its spiritual vitality –
the willingness to ask for a blessing.

Perhaps the fiery chariot and horses
was the way the writer was describing the presence of God.
A very active presence – and in that presence
Elisha asks for a blessing – a double portion.



The story challenges us to think big.
It challenges us to ask for what Bruce Epperly describes as “our heart’s desire.”¹
We can learn to ask for the blessing.

What if we thought of God’s vision for our lives as our heart’s desire -
moment by moment – day by day?
What if we opened ourselves more fully to where and what it’s drawing us to?
What might the energy of God be drawing you to?
What is your heart’s desire?

You may not – and probably don’t – imagine the presence of God
as a fiery chariot in a whirlwind – but you imagine it as something.

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Is it active? Does it move – does it want to take you somewhere?

That's what is great about the chariot.
It was a powerful metaphor for ancient peoples –
later becomes part of the Jewish mystical traditions.



My grandmother and my mother sang to me the lullaby
as they rocked me as a little girl.
"Swing low – sweet chariot – coming forth to carry me home."
I guess that was an image of God's presence for me a long time ago.
Maybe it's why I got so excited about the chariot this week - as a rich image.

Rob came in Wednesday. We work on the music then.

I said, Rob, we have to find "Chariots of Fire."

We learned to download sheet music from the internet.

We let it ring in the pipes of the organ – we hope you enjoy it.

I even asked him to play it for the Prelude and the Postlude.

I watched the movie – and found another mentoring relationship.

Sam Mossabin is the mentor and coach for Harold Abrahamson
while Harold prepares for the 1924 Olympics.

Do you remember the movie?

"If I don't win – I won't race."

"If you don't race – you won't win." (Sybil to Harold)

Perhaps it's like asking for the blessing. If you don't ask – it won't happen.

Think of the teachers – the mentors – the coaches you have had –
what you have learned – how it's made a difference in your life.

And think about how you mentor
and how you will be a trusted friend to others in the future.

What is the image that draws you into tomorrow - into your heart's desire?

Perhaps your mentors have given you one – or perhaps they will.

It might be the chariot.

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It might be those runners on the beach at the end of the movie.

It does not matter so much what it is.

It matters that we have images that carry us past the uncertain and scary times –
the times of doubt - the times of goodbye – to important teachers.

It matters that we have those things to draw us into the future
with energy – with confidence – with love.

Don't be afraid to ask for your heart's desire – for it may the divine at work in you – even today.

Remember – if you don't ask – it won't happen.

Amen.

¹ *Process and Faith Lectionary*, February 22, 2009