

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
Ascension Day¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Second Book of the Kings, commonly called the Fourth Book of the Kings.³

“And it came to pass, when the LORD would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Bethel [BETH-ull]. And Elisha said unto him, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel [BETH-ull]. And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel [BETH-ull] came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the LORD hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on. And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan. And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground.

“And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.⁴ And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from

thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

“And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces. He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the LORD God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over. And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.⁵

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith [SETH], When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and

Let us dare, like Elisha, to ask for heroic faith, heroic hope, heroic love. We’re not interested in the minimum requirements for salvation, but the full deployment of our entire being in the love and service of our Lord—our entire being, not as we define it way down here—but as our Lord defines it way up here.

He does not want us tip-toeing through life. He wants us to share in His victory, and Holy Ghost grit, and His love and peace, and the place He has prepared for us.

Jesus said that “When the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, comes, He will testify of me.” He will reveal Jesus as our Prophet, Priest and King. Our Lord will be the most important person in our lives, and our lives will witness to that fact. Do we dare ask for a double portion of the Holy Spirit?

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May 20, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written for the Sunday after Ascension Day, 2012.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 37 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxi (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxix (CIPBC 1963).

³ II Kings 2:1-15 (KJV).

⁴ In ancient Israel, the first-born son, as the principal heir, received an inheritance twice as large as that of each of his brethren. Thus by asking for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, Elisha was asking that he be constituted as the heir to Elijah’s prophetic Office. –Ed.

⁵ Ephesians 4:1-16 (KJV).

⁶ II Kings 2:9-12 (KJV).

⁷ Bishop Ordinary, the Diocese of the Holy Cross; Rector, the Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC.

Father takes us right to the top, every time we gather for this Sacrament.

“God is gone up with a merry noise,” sings the Psalmist. “O clap your hands all ye people. O sing unto God with a voice of melody. For the Lord is high and to be feared. He is the great King upon all the earth.”

Before Elijah ascended into Heaven, Elisha asked to inherit a double portion of his spirit. This was a bold request, and it shows how ascension is associated with the outpouring of the Spirit. The ascent of Elijah meant the descent of his spirit. The Ascension of our Lord means the descent of the Holy Ghost, with all His attendant gifts. This is a Royal Exchange. The taking of man’s flesh, in Christ, to the Father, means the breathing of the Holy Spirit into man.

Do we dare, like Elisha, ask for a double portion? Do we dare ask God to push to the limits, to the frontiers, our capacity for loving Him and one another? to stretch us to limits that hurt? God will take from us things we never knew we had, like the coach who works his athletes to aches and pains and new visions of new limits they never knew possible. We should seek to imitate the great saints. We should aspire to holiness, and yearn for the complete fulfillment of the reign of Christ in our hearts. There let Him burn away all our petty selfish, self-centered, self-serving, self-seeking, self-congratulating ways, so that He is Lord over every particle of our being.

Speaking of this transformation, and of Elijah’s ascent into heaven in a chariot of fire, our confirmands and those who are received into the Church as having already been confirmed all enter more fully into the amazing transforming effect the Holy Spirit has upon us, because the He works overtime when we give him more to work with. In Confirmation, He gives the us the grace to live our Christian life *with class*.

some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

In 896 BC, Elijah ascended into heaven in a chariot of fire and a whirlwind. Elisha, his disciple, saw it, and had his request granted: “Let a double portion of thy spirit be upon

me.” This happened at one of the most decisive turning points in Israel’s history. Most of Israel had gone after the Canaanite god, Baal [**BAY-ull**]. God raised up Elijah and Elisha to lead His people back to Him. God worked mighty wonders through these two prophets. Elijah’s ascension is certainly one of those mighty wonders.

Tradition has it that others were assumed into heaven: Enoch, Moses, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. In Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8, something mysterious happens to Philip the Deacon after he baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch: “the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more... but Philip was found at Azotus.” Scientists are fascinated today by the possible total conversion of matter into energy, and the conversion of the energy back into matter, so that people could be beamed up or down or sideways, as in the series, Star Trek.

Today we celebrate the mystery of Jesus’ Ascension, from the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem. Jesus explained His Ascension to the Apostles at the Last Supper as His return to the Father, so that He could send the Holy Ghost, and prepare a place for us. The ascent of our flesh in Christ means the descent of the Spirit.

The great 17th century theologian, Lancelot Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester in England, called this the Royal Exchange. Elijah’s ascent means the bestowal on Elisha of a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. Jesus’ ascent means the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh, in a Royal Exchange. And then, in the Spirit, in every Eucharist, we ascend with Christ to the heavenlies, where we worship before the throne in the glory of the new creation. The Eucharist is the sacrament of our ascension.

Our Lord’s Ascension reveals Him as the Prophet: “If I go away, I will send Him unto you, the Holy Spirit, the Counselor”. This is the Comforter, the Spirit of prophecy, the third

Person of the Trinity, in whom the Apostles are sent out, in Whom Jesus can be present everywhere at once, available to everyone, at once.

Our Lord’s Ascension reveals Him as the Priest, Who now presents the Blood of His Sacrifice to the Father directly, in person. He has flung open Heaven’s gates for us. As the Pioneer of our salvation, He has opened up the way to the Holy of Holies, and given us access, too. His redeeming work is now complete, so He can sit down at the right hand of the Father.

Finally, our Lord’s Ascension reveals Him as the King. Jesus is now enthroned as the King. He is exalted as King of kings and Lord of lords. All authority is given to Him, from the undiscovered galaxies to the depths of my own heart. He is King over all of it. His death brought it all back from the power of Satan. His Resurrection gave all of it new life. His Ascension gives all of it the promise of eternity.

Jesus is our Prophet, Priest and King, exalted to the highest place, so that He might fill all things. What this means, as we sing in Christopher Wordsworth’s Hymn 103, is that God has raised our human nature on the clouds to His right hand:

“There we sit in heav’nly places,
There with thee in glory stand.
Jesus reigns, adored by angels;
Man with God is on the throne;
Mighty Lord, in thine ascension,
We by faith behold our own.”

This is the exaltation of our human nature in Christ. There is no religion in the world that comes even remotely close to this destiny for man. Our destiny in Christ, fulfilled in every Eucharist, blows the minds of all today’s cynics. No one else says anything nearly so audacious, so radical. The Gospel of the love of God is that through the Son, and in the Spirit, the