

Whenever we talk about the Ascension, it might seem a little strange to us, because it sure seems like Jesus is going away, that we are saying goodbye to him. And whenever we say goodbye to somebody, we usually think of that as something sad, as something that we want to avoid, because it leaves us with so many questions. Will we ever see them again? What are we going to do in the days ahead? How am I going to be able to face whatever may come? And because we're left with so many questions, celebrating Ascension can seem kind of strange, even a little sad.

And we see that happening also today with Elisha in our Old Testament reading. He also is sad at the departure of his master, at the ascension of Elijah. And because he is sad and is wondering what is going to happen, he is left thinking, "Where am I going to turn? Where am I going to go?" Because God had told Elijah and Elisha that Elijah was going to be taken up into heaven. And that was distressing to Elisha, because his master had always been with him. He had been his right-hand man. He had seen all kinds of miracles done by his hand. He had been with him through thick and thin. And now Elijah is going away. What was he going to do in a time when people weren't very faithful to the Lord? What was he going to do in a time when even the king had turned from God? Elijah had been his rock, had been somebody he could depend on, somebody he could always turn to in a time of trouble. And now he was going away. Where would he go? What would he do in the days ahead?

And so as we meet the two of them leaving Gilgal, heading eastward, Elijah says to Elisha, "Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." Now, the reason why he's going to Bethel is because Elijah had started a number of schools, the schools of the sons of the prophets, kind of like seminaries, where he would teach new prophets how to preach and to proclaim the Word of the Lord. And one of these schools was there in Bethel. So he was going to Bethel as a way of saying goodbye to his students, as a way of saying goodbye to those who were at the school. But Elijah is also not a proud man. He's not looking for attention. He's not looking for glory. And so he says this to Elisha as a way of saying, "Maybe I need to do this alone. Maybe I need to go on by myself, and it would be better if you just stayed here." But Elisha isn't having it. He doesn't want to be parted from his master. He wants to stick with him. And so he says to him, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." Because if anything, he loves his master. He doesn't want to be left behind.

But I suspect that was also going on in his mind at this time was that he really didn't want what was about to happen to happen. He doesn't want to be separated from Elijah, and so he's putting off the inevitable as long as he can. And we know this, especially because when they get to Bethel and the sons of the prophets say to him, "Don't you know that your master's going away?" he says, "Yes, I know it. Keep quiet. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to hear it, because it's just too painful for me to deal with right now. Because where am I going to go when my master is gone?" And the same thing also happens at Jericho, because Jericho is another place where Elijah had set up one of these schools. And Elisha refuses to be separated from him, because he wants to stick with his master no matter what. Because he doesn't want to think about what he's going to do when Elijah is finally taken away.

And so the two of them get to the Jordan River. Elijah takes off his cloak, and he rolls it up, and he hits the water with it. And when he does that, the waters part. And this is the last miracle that Elijah does while is still on earth, and it shows beyond all doubt that God is in fact with him.

Because who could do something like this, if God wasn't with him? Just as Moses had separated the Red Sea with his staff, and just as the priests had separated the Jordan with the ark when Joshua came into Canaan, so now Elijah also separates these waters as a miracle from God, as a testament that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. That had always been very comforting to Elisha, to know that God was near, to know that if he wanted to go find God he only had to go to his master. But what was he going to do when he was no longer there?

And as they're going along, Elijah says to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And Elisha says, "Give me a double portion of your Spirit." Elisha is not being greedy here. We might think that he's just trying to hoard everything up for himself. No, that's not the case. What he's doing here is asking for a double inheritance, because he considers himself to be Elijah's son, that Elijah is like a father to him. And the law of God said that the firstborn son was entitled to a double inheritance, so he's basically saying to him an expression of love. "I love you as a father! Please treat me as if I was your son." Elijah says, "That's a hard thing. I can't promise that to you, because that can only come from God. But I will at least give you this: if you see me when I go up into heaven, then it will be done for you." And so they're going along wondering what is going to happen now that the time has come.

But suddenly it happens. A great storm cloud descends upon them, a sign that the Lord has come near. Just like the storm cloud descended upon Mount Sinai to show that God was there, and just as God spoke out of the whirlwind to the prophets and to Job, God has come to take Elijah away. And in that moment, a fiery chariot and horses of fire separate the two men. Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind. And in that moment, Elisha cries out "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw him no more. Now when he says that, Christians, he's not actually talking about that fiery chariot. He's not talking about the horses of fire when he says "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen." We know this because a little bit later in 2 Kings, just as Elisha himself is about to die in 2 Kings chapter 13 verse 14, we hear this: "Now when Elisha had fallen sick with the illness of which he was to die, Joash, the king of Israel, went down to him and wept before him, crying, 'My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!'" So in other words, he's not talking about the fiery chariot. He is talking about Elijah himself. He considers Elijah to be "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen."

So what does that mean, exactly? It means that he considers him to be something of strength, the hope and the future of Israel. Because consider what Isaiah says in chapter 31: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!" So in other words, the chariot is a picture of strength. It is a picture of power and of might. And for Elijah to be like a chariot means that he is the strength of Israel in Elisha's mind, that he is their hope, that he is their future. So for him to cry out like this, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" shows that he's saying: "There goes our strength! There goes our hope! There goes our future! And now it's gone forever." And that's why he tears his clothes in two, because he's so distraught. He doesn't know what to do. And you can imagine him as he's going back to the Jordan River carrying the cloak of his master. He's left wondering, "What am I going to do now? Where am I going to turn? Where is our future?" And that's why he stands beside the bank of the Jordan and cries out, "Where is the Lord, the God of

Elijah?" Because if Elijah is gone, then God must be gone too. What was he going to do in the days ahead?

Christians, I think that we can sometimes think of the ascension of Jesus in the same way. To think that Jesus has gone away, that he is gone from us and that our hope has gone with him. That the chariots of Israel and its horsemen, our Lord Jesus Christ, is now in heaven, and we kind of wish that he would be down here among us, right? Because it would be so much better, don't you think, that if he was right here with us whenever we were in trouble! We wouldn't have to be afraid. We could go to him whenever we wanted. There wouldn't be any more divisions in the church, so we think, because we could just go to him to take care of all of our problems. And even when it comes to evangelism, it'd be real easy, because we could give them his home address. They could go talk to him and he could convince them himself. It would be so much easier, we think, if Jesus was still here! And so for him to be up in heaven feels like our hope is gone. How are we going to be able to face the future? How can we face the troubles in our lives with Jesus up in heaven? We might as well cry out with Elisha, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?"

But Christians, God has not left us alone. God is not gone. And we hear that even here in the Old Testament. Because when Elisha strikes that water with his masters' cloak, the waters part. He does the exact same miracle that Elijah had just recently done. And it shows beyond all doubt that God didn't go up into heaven away from them. God was still with them. The spirit of Elijah now rested on Elisha. The Holy Spirit had descended upon him, so that he would continue the work that Elijah had done, so that he would continue to preach that Word to Israel. God was still with his people, and so Elisha knew in that moment that he wasn't alone, that the God of Elijah was still with him.

And Christians, we know the same thing, too, about our Lord Jesus Christ. Because he has ascended into heaven and has given us the Holy Spirit. The Spirit now rests upon you. And we see him at work in our lives, preaching to us the Word, bringing to us the sacraments, bringing people to faith, even strengthening that faith, and changing and transforming lives. Because God is still with his people. God is here in his Church. He has not left us or forsaken us. And even Jesus Christ, who has gone up into heaven, isn't sitting at the right hand of the Father distant from us. Jesus is still with us. He comes to us through that same Word and sacrament to comfort us and to be with us in a way that is far greater than anything that we could even possibly imagine. God has not abandoned his people. The ascension is not saying "goodbye" to Jesus. The ascension is the beginning of a new and glorious thing, the going out of the Gospel into all the world, so that we can take comfort in our risen and ascended Lord.

So Christians, where is the Lord, the God of Elisha? He is ascended far above all heavens, and he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he is with us even to the end of the age. So don't be afraid. Don't worry about what the future may bring. God is still with his people. And our risen and ascended Lord will never leave us again.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, your Son, Jesus Christ, has risen up on high and is seated at your right hand forever. We pray that you would comfort us in the midst of all of our

troubles, so that we may know that your Son, Jesus Christ, has overcome all things and that in him we have the eternal victory. In his name we pray. Amen.