

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF DENTON
REV. JOHN BURTON
FEBRUARY 19, 2012

SERMON: "HEAVEN BOUND"
TEXT: 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."

When I first heard the call to ministry, before I said "yes," the thought of being with someone when they died made me tremble. 40 years since, I find that I still tremble. I can't see either fiery chariot and horses or the Savior gently taking the

hand of newest resident of heaven, but I know that I am in the presence of something as far beyond me as galaxies are above me.

Heaven

Where did Elijah go? Where did the fiery chariot take him?

Well, we believe in Heaven and Hell. Purgatory and limbo are not in our vocabulary or belief system. Therefore we have only two choices. Either we believe that the heavenly chariot took Elijah, one of God's greatest prophets during Old Testament Times, to Hell or to Heaven. I think that the scripture clearly suggests Heaven and, personally, I wouldn't mind standing in line outside Elijah's lake house just to get to ask him a question or two. I hope that will be free because I don't think we can take money with us.

In fact, we want to go where Elijah went even though we really don't expect to get there the way Elijah did! It would be cool though! Can you imagine, periodically, the fiery chariot of God sliding to a halt in the center aisle and pausing long enough for an exceedingly faithful member to climb on board and then smile and wave at us as he or she departs...in style.

What a way to go!

But more important that how we get there is that we get to the right place. At the end of our lives we want the faith of our hearts and the works of our hands to reflect Jesus' love for us.

William Cullen Bryant, great orator and presidential candidate during the late 1800's, who was one of the lawyers in the Scopes Monkey Trial, said this.

**So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like a quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him and lies down to pleasant dreams.**

May our faith and our faith-filled actions give us the confidence to lie down to pleasant dreams until we waken in the Kingdom!

In other words, live so that when your time is near you see death as the beginning of a joyful adventure rather than a fearsome and uncertain ending.

In heaven we will find peace, reunion with loved ones, the answer to all our questions, and the beginning of an eternal adventure in God's wider kingdom.

Successor

But there are some things that worry us about leaving. We want our affairs to be "in order" before we go.

I'm not talking about completing your bucket list. I'm thinking of all the things that we need to do before we die to make our death easier on our loved ones. Have you thought about that?

I like to think that for me that's a while off but you never know. So I've started a list. Feel free to email me this afternoon with additional suggestions but my list includes:

- 1. Create a will**
- 2. Pay off all my debts**
- 3. Finish all my home repairs**
- 4. Organize my papers and throwing out all the stuff no one will want**
- 5. Create a list of all my outstanding contracts with the terms and the contact information of the agent for each one**
- 6. List information on all life insurance policies**
- 7. List all my assets and where they may be found**
- 8. Create a list of all the people who should be notified at my death.**
- 9. Make peace with all my enemies**
- 10. And say "I love you" to all my loved ones**

If I can do all those things I think I'll feel more comfortable about leaving. But not completely!!

What about the people whom you love and feel responsible for? Maybe you are the guardian of someone who can't take care of themselves. Maybe your spouse depends on you? Maybe you are a part of an organization that would be obstructed by your absence? Or maybe you are a key financial supporter of an

organization or agency that would be in dire circumstances without your annual giving?

One thing that you can do is to be responsible...and find someone responsible to carry on in your place.

That's what Elijah did. Elisha was there, begging for a double share of Elijah's spirit so he could continue Elijah's work. Elijah's death interrupted nothing. The things he loved were taken care of.

Wouldn't that be a comfort – to know that your loved ones will be cared for, your church supported, your assets distributed as you intended, and your pets taken care of! To have an Elisha to step into your shoes and follow through for you – wouldn't that be great!

Recruiting and Equipping

But Elishas don't grow on trees and fall down in your lap like Sir Isaac Newton's apple! You have to work for them. You have to find people with potential, recruit them, train them, allow them to fail, and set them up to succeed. It is a long and arduous task – you can't simply Google "Elisha's R Us" and expect one to ring your doorbell tomorrow, ready to go!

They are worth the effort for what they buy you is the ability to face death without fear or regrets or worries.

In terms of the church we have to:

Go out into the community and find our Elishas;

Entice them to come join our church;

Nurture our Elishas' leadership skills;

Invest them with our support;

Allow our Elishas to learn from failures;

Enable them to succeed;

And trust our Elishas with the reigns of leadership before we go!

That's a lot but every Elisha is worth the effort for what they buy you is the ability to face death without regrets or worries and to have the knowledge that your church will be in good hands.

As much as I get wrapped up in very personal thoughts when I think about this subject, I think this scripture is in the Bible as an encouragement to people of faith to think about what will happen to their church when they have gone on into heavenly glories.

Will we have accomplished all the things that the people who we leave behind will need to succeed or will they have to scramble to replace the knowledge, wisdom, or resources you now bring to the table?

Will there be someone to step into your shoes, an Elisha, who will keep the church from failing in its mission?

And will that younger Elisha be fully trained, nurtured, and confident in the tasks that our departures will require of him or her?

Sometimes such thoughts make me tremble because each one of us will give a unique answer. How will you answer?

When you lie down and wrap the drapery of your couch about you
Will you lie down to pleasant dreams
Or will you worry about what you have left undone
And if there is an Elisha to carry on for you?