

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
2 Kings 2:9-12
August 27, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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This morning, I get to just tell you some wonderful Old Testament stories, which is fun for me. The scene is set in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, roughly 850 years before Jesus was born. The main characters are King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and the prophet Elijah. Can't you just tell from the names who the bad guys are?

King Ahab is officially a worshiper of Yahweh, the one true God of Israel, but he's wishy washy about it. It is almost like he is just going through the motions. Jezebel, the queen, is a Phoenician princess, and she worships the Canaanite god Ba'al. To please her, King Ahab not only allows her to worship Ba'al privately, but he even sets up altars in high places all around Israel, altars to Ba'al, the god of storms and fertility, and to Asherah, the goddess of fertility, so that not only Jezebel but ALL the people may worship them. Queen Jezebel imports hundreds of prophets to the god Ba'al, and she even begins to have the prophets of Yahweh killed. You can imagine that the Old Testament writer who tells these stories is not happy about this turn of events, not happy at all!

So, God calls the prophet Elijah to confront Ahab and set Israel back on the straight and narrow, to get them back to honoring the covenant that God had made with the people on Mount Sinai, when God promised to be their God and the people promised to follow God's commandments.

Now, Elijah is not a member of the king's court. He doesn't have a regular presence in the capital. Instead, he is a gadfly. He flits into King Ahab's life, offers a stinging challenge, upsets things all around, and then flits back out again, sometimes to the desert, sometimes to the mountains, but always away from the action, until God calls him back again to challenge Ahab once more. So, what we have in the books of 1 and 2 Kings is a series of vignettes, in which Elijah asserts God's power and authority, and Ahab always, always loses. If these were cartoon characters, Elijah would be the Roadrunner, and King Ahab would be Wile E. Coyote.

When God first sends Elijah to meet King Ahab, there is a terrible drought in the land. It has been going on for years, and the people and animals are really suffering. The king is making matters worse for the people by raiding all the countryside for feed for his own animals. Naturally, in circumstances like these, some of the people would want to turn to Ba'al, the Canaanite god of storms and fertility, hoping for a little rainstorm. But God sends Elijah to issue a challenge to the prophets of Ba'al to show all the people who is really in charge of the weather, who is really the author of life. It is a great, dramatic story – but I am not going to tell it today – because I am saving that particular scene for a Sunday in the fall. All you need to know for now is that Elijah wins the contest, the prophets of Ba'al lose in a big, public, embarrassing way, and the rains begin. Be sure to come back to church on November 5 to hear the rest of THAT story. It is worth the wait.

Needless to say, Queen Jezebel is NOT happy with the outcome of this contest between Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al. She sends word to Elijah saying, "I am out to get you. I swear, I will have you killed." So, Elijah flees to the desert. He has done an amazing miracle to demonstrate God's power in front of all the people, and all he got for it is a death sentence from the queen. He is deeply depressed, begging God to take his life. He lies down under a tree in the desert, probably expecting never to wake up again. But God sends angels to care for Elijah. They give him food and water and rest. Eventually Elijah presses on farther into the desert. He walks 40 days and 40 nights (which is Bible-speak for a really, really long time) until he reaches Mount Sinai. Elijah is going back to the covenantal source, the place where God and the people of Israel declared allegiance to one another. He finds a cave in the mountain, and he hides there. I just love this scene. Elijah, exhausted and life-threatened, is sheltering in the very place that is the source of his faith.

And there, in a cave on Mount Sinai, Elijah has an argument with God. God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answers, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, but the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." God says, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks into pieces, but the Lord was not in the wind. And then there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice in the silence that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah? Go back out to where all the problems are. Find your successor and start training him. I will find and preserve thousands in Israel who have not bowed to Ba'al. Get back down the mountain." This is such a powerful scene. Elijah has found a place of shelter in his faith, shelter from the wind, from the earthquake, from the fire, and shelter from the world where he feels so incapable of doing what God has called him to do. He has shelter at last, and God comes to him in the sheer silence to say, "You can't stay here forever. Get back out in the world and do the work I called you to do." That is a challenge for all of us. We come to church, to prayer, to fellowship to refresh our spirits, but God's call to us is always a call back out into the wider world.

So, Elijah does as God commands. He heads back down the mountain. He finds Elisha and calls him to be his apprentice prophet. And Elijah meets King Ahab one more time, when God calls him to stand up for the little guy, for the powerless, in the face of all the king's power. There is a farmer named Naboth, who owns a vineyard right next to one of King Ahab's palaces. King Ahab says to Naboth, "Sell me your vineyard, so that I may use this land for a vegetable garden for my palace. Or if you won't sell it to me, I will trade you for a better vineyard somewhere else." But Naboth says, "This is my ancestral land. God forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." When Queen Jezebel hears this story, she pokes at Ahab's pride. "Are you the king, or what?" she asks. "Leave it to me. I will get the vineyard for you."

So, Jezebel writes letters in Ahab's name and seals them with his seal and sends them to the elders and nobles who live in Naboth's city. The letters say, "Find two scoundrels and have them bring a charge against Naboth, saying that he has cursed God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death." And, of course, that is what happens. So, Jezebel says to Ahab, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth, which he refused to give to you for money, for Naboth is now dead. And Ahab sets out to take possession of the vineyard. God sends Elijah to confront Ahab right there in the vineyard. King Ahab says, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" Elijah responds, "I have found you." And Elijah throws down all the curses on King Ahab and Queen Jezebel that God had told him to throw. It is a very long list of curses. King Ahab goes into deep mourning, and God is moved by Ahab's repentance. God holds off on punishing him. King Ahab eventually dies in sort of the normal way for kings of this period – he dies in battle.

Eventually it is time for Elijah, too, to leave this life. But he doesn't die a normal death. In fact, he may not have died at all, according to the scripture. Elijah tells his apprentice Elisha that it is time for him to go, and he sets out on a journey, leaving Elisha behind. But Elisha refuses to be left. He just keeps going with Elijah, no matter what Elijah says. First, they come to Bethel, and all the prophets that live there come out to greet them. Again, Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind, but Elisha refuses, so they travel onward to Jericho, and again they are greeted by the prophets who live there. Eventually, they journey on to the River Jordan, the final destination, and Elijah asks Elisha, "What may I do for you before I am taken from you?" Elisha responds, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit," (meaning the portion of an estate that a first-born son would inherit). Elijah says, "You have asked a hard thing, yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, then it will be granted to you." As they continue walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separate the two of them, and Elijah ascends in a whirlwind into heaven. That sweet chariot had come to carry Elijah home.

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Elijah was the prophet of God who stood up to royal power on behalf of the powerless ones. He captured the imagination of the people in a way that goes well beyond even his hugely powerful role in this scripture, largely because Elijah did not die, but ascended to heaven. There were so many ways to imagine, to yearn for his return. There were some who identified Jesus as Elijah, come to earth once more. Today, at Seder, the Passover meal, Jews the world over leave the door ajar and an extra plate and a glass of wine at the table, just in case Elijah should come again and need a place to celebrate Seder.

And years ago, enslaved people in America sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," which tells the story of Elijah's ascension into heaven. It was a coded song, telling those who heard it that saviors from the Underground Railroad were coming to lead them to freedom, to life.

Let's sing together:

Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, coming for to carry me home?

A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.

Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.

Amen