

### WHERE'D HE GO?

Human beings have always been fascinated with the after-life, asking questions like “What happens when you die? Where do you go?” Many theologians have spent a great deal of time trying to answer those questions, so too philosophers, poets, composers, and other artists. Scientists have explored the matter. Even cartoonists have wondered what happens when we pass from this mortal coil.

Charles Schultz, in his classic *Peanuts* comic strip, addressed the issue more than once. One such strip from 1992, shows Peppermint Patty and Marcy at their school desks. Patty is trying to figure out a problem on a test paper, and asks, “I wonder if they have fractions in heaven . . .”

“No fractions,” says Marcy, “No decimals either . . .”

“How about commas?” asks Patty.

“There have to be commas,” says Marcy, “We can’t avoid them.” (*Peanuts*, 11-29-1993)

Cartoonist Piraro in his one panel cartoon *Bizarro*, depicts St Peter standing at a podium with a group of halo-wearing folks arrayed before him. They are all holding sheets of paper. St. Peter says, “Number 48, True; Number 49, False, Number 50, William Shatner; Number 51, Yes; Number 52, The Ponderosa; Number 53, Every Other Tuesday . . .” The caption reads “When we die, all the questions are answered.” (*Bizarro*, 5-21-1994)

Even Bil Keane, creator of the somewhat sentimental one panel cartoon *The Family Circus* weighs in on the matter. Six-year-old Dolly, sitting with an open Bible, tells her little brothers, “Heaven is a great big hug that lasts forever.” (*The Family Circus*, 2-6-1993)

While I am sure that my retired English professor Mother will be pleased to hear that there are commas in heaven, and all of us are reassured by the idea of finally having all the answers as well as being given an eternal hug, the truth is we really know very little about life-after-death. We can speculate and imagine, but ultimately it is beyond our ken.

Intriguingly, though, our reading from Second Kings raises just that question. And in the end offers an answer that we may not expect. It is one of the best-known stories in the Hebrew scriptures. The prophet Elijah has led a rich and full life. He has taken great risks, confronting the evil he has witnessed in his society and challenging those in powerful positions. He has literally had to run for his life more than once. He has been a prophet extraordinaire. But

now his days have come to a close, and he is about to literally pass the mantle on to his protégé and successor, Elisha.

At the beginning of our passage we are given a heads up. The LORD we are told, “is about to take Elijah up to heaven by whirlwind.” (2:1) What that means, though is a bit unclear. At first Elijah, knowing what lies ahead, tells young Elisha to hang back. “Stay here,” he says as they are standing together in Gilgal. But Elisha, ever the faithful disciple, refuses. “As the LORD lives,” he says, “I will not leave you.” (2:2) So together they head down the road, only to be met by a company of prophets. Prophets who are not as gifted as either Elijah or Elisha, but prophets, nonetheless.

They know that Elijah is soon to pass on, cross over, transition into the next life. And they want to make sure young Elisha knows what’s up. “Do you know this is a fated day,” they ask, “The day Elijah is going to . . .” “Hush,” says Elisha, “Of course I know.”

Once again Elijah tries to convince Elisha to stay behind as he continues making his way to the Jordan River. But Elisha is not to be deterred. He is going, no matter what Elijah says. When they get to Jericho, the last stop before the Jordan, yet another group of prophets sees it as their job to fill the young man in on where this is all headed, and once again he tells them to pipe down. He doesn’t need to be told or reminded that he’s about to lose the most important person in his life to death. And while Elijah tries one more time to hold him off, Elisha persists and goes with him, followed close by fifty of the busybody prophets.

Finally, they reach the Jordan. When they do Elijah turns to his young Elisha and offers to entertain one last request, grant one last wish from this disciple who has been so faithful to him. “What can I do for you before I am taken away?” Elisha doesn’t hesitate a moment. He knows exactly what he wants, indeed what he needs, to carry on his master’s work. “Please,” he says, “let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” (2:9b) Elijah smiles, for he knows that such a gift, if it comes, will come from God. “I can’t guarantee such a thing” he says, “but if you see me taken from you, it will be granted . . . if not, it will not.” (2:10)

Have you ever been with someone at the time of their passing? If they were still able to speak, you may have spoken of small matters, but somewhere in the conversation, you managed to say, “You know I love you, right?” And perhaps your loved one was able to respond in kind. I’ve seen it happen, sometimes mere minutes before death comes. It is that kind of conversation I imagine Elijah and Elisha have as they continue walking and talking, when suddenly the whirlwind arrives in the form of a chariot. A chariot of fire pulled by horses aflame with God’s spirit. “Because I could not stop for Death,” Emily Dickinson would write centuries later, “Death kindly stopped for me.” And so it was for Elijah, he is caught up in the whirlwind, and whisked away by the horse-drawn chariot into the heavens--into

heaven itself. Elisha, grief stricken by the realization that it really has happened, cries out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" (2:12) And then torn by grief, he rends his garment, tears it in two.

And that is where we often end this passage. Elijah whisked away by chariots of fire, and Elisha standing on the banks of the river, with the company of fifty prophets in the background, all caught up in their grieving. "Swing low," we sing, "sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home!"

But there is more to the story. For young Elisha, no doubt with tears in his eyes, and great sorrow in his soul, bends down and picks up Elijah's mantle, his outer garment, the symbol of his work as a prophet, and uses it to perform his own first miracle, as he strikes the waters of the Jordan and causes them to part a la Moses and the Red Sea, and then crosses back over, back over to where he will continue the work begun by Elijah.

But fifty prophets who followed behind still don't get it. Yes, they bow before Elisha, acknowledge that Elijah's mantle has been passed. But still, they can't help but wonder, "Where'd he go? Listen," they say, "there are fifty strong men with us. They can cover a lot of ground. Why don't we go and find out where Elijah went." At first Elisha resists. He knows it is a waste of precious time. But finally he relents, "OK," he says, "send them to look." And so they do. But three days later they come back empty-handed, with nothing to report. "We can't find him anywhere." Elisha, of course, is not surprised. He knows Elijah is gone. But he also he knows he is safely in the care and keeping of God--wherever that may be. He shakes his "Didn't I say don't bother?"

And then, walking away from the befuddled prophets, he begins his own work. Work that will honor the memory of his master, work that will continue the ministry of Elijah. Instead of standing around wondering "Where'd he go?", instead of getting caught up in endless speculation about a mystery beyond his knowing, Elisha, understands that the best way he can deal with his grief is by being a living memorial to the one he loved so dearly.

What happens after we die? What's heaven really like? I don't know. It is indeed a mystery beyond my understanding. But like Elisha, I know this for certain. Whatever happens, wherever we end up, we are always in the care and keeping of God. We are caught up not in a whirlwind of fire, but rather in a whirlwind of eternal love. And while I could spend precious time speculating about the afterlife, and I suppose some would expect me to do so, I am a preacher after all, I won't. After all there were those who expected Elisha to spend time staring into the heavens, wondering how and where Elijah had gone. But Elisha realized that his time, his energy, indeed his double share of the spirit, was better spent continuing the effort of speaking truth to power; better spent seeking justice and healing for his people;

**better spent doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. And that would indeed be a powerful way to show his love for Elijah. Yes, clearly, he was grief stricken, perhaps angry, perhaps depressed, perhaps numbed. Those things are a real part of grief, and will be felt, will be experienced when death stops for ones we love. And we do well to allow ourselves time to experience those feelings. But then let us move on to honor the ones we love, and to honor our grief, by trusting that they are safe in God's hands, and then picking up the mantle and carrying on their work. And in doing so, become living memorials to those we have loved.**

**Amen**

**John H. Danner**