

### **Swing Low, Sweet Spirit**

*2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62*

*Preached at Trinity Cathedral*

*Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 30, 2019*

Elijah and Elisha are not welcome in the courts of the powerful. They wander the wilderness of Israel, sometimes running, sometimes hiding, often weary and starving and thirsty. They are usually moments from death if not for God's timely, miraculous intervention. Here we find them again, leaving Gilgal – the epicenter of Israelite idolatry, manifestation of all the corrupt ambition and wonton greed of the king and his court – and headed for the shelter of the wilderness and the banks of the river Jordan. Earlier, as recorded in 1 Kings 1, Elijah had inserted himself into the political maneuverings of Ahaziah, King of Israel. Twice the king sent 50 soldiers to capture Elijah and twice Elijah called down fire from heaven to consume them. The third time Elijah is instead sent by God to the king where he prophesies the king's untimely death. Now, fleeing deeper into the wilderness, things feel different. This time, Elijah will be taken. Everyone understands what is happening; Elisha just can't believe it. Three times Elijah asks Elisha to remain behind and three times Elisha replies, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." Finally, after crossing the Jordan in a manner reminiscent of Moses parting the Red Sea, Elijah asks what he can do for Elisha before he is taken. Elisha boldly responds, "Please, let me inherit a double portion of your spirit." He has requested a difficult thing. "Nevertheless," remarks Elijah, "if you see me as I am taken from you, it will be yours." Suddenly, a chariot of fire driven by flaming horses appears, passing right between the companions. Elijah is caught up in the raging, fiery whirlwind and is taken up into heaven. "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home."

This narrative certainly leaves an impression. An unwelcome prophet of God confronting the corrupt, idolatrous powers, the mysterious anticipation of being taken, a seemingly

impossible request for a double portion of God's spirit, the power of God on full display as heavenly flames engulf Elijah and carry him up – these are events not easily forgotten. In them you can almost hear the tune of the Gospels, this faint melody that sounds so familiar. An unwelcome, persecuted Messiah, disciples bearing witness, the waters of the river Jordan, an astonishing ascension, an outpouring of God's spirit like fire from heaven. We hear in this story of Elijah a refrain foreshadowing Pentecost. A sweet, haunting melody that acts as signpost, guiding us to Jesus.

Jesus' face was set towards Jerusalem. The seat of religious authority, a manifestation of holiness codes with very real boundaries to separate Jews from Gentiles, women from men, people from priests, clean from unclean, righteous from reprobate. Jesus is not overly welcome there. Referencing Psalm 84 where it says, "the sparrow has found a home and the swallow a nest for herself where she places her young by [God's] altars," Jesus remarks that he has no place to lay his head. The birds may live in the temple, but the Messiah is not gladly received. Even still, his face is set towards Jerusalem. He means to confront the religious authorities and challenge the manifestations of their limiting theological vision. But before he gets there, Jesus and the disciples approach a Samaritan village where the inhabitants, when asked, refuse to welcome Jesus. After all, he is headed to Jerusalem. Since Samaritans are considered by the religious authorities to be impure, Jerusalem is a place they are clearly not welcome. Why, then, would Jesus care for them? Recalling the story of Elijah's holy fire consuming the soldiers, James and John are ready to do the same to these offenders. Jesus rebukes them. "You do not know what spirit you are of." Not all ancient versions of the text have Jesus' rebuke, hence the brackets around the text in today's reading, but later versions include it and make the connection to Elijah. Jesus' spirit is wholly different than that of the disciples' proposal. His problem is not

with the Samaritans, but with those who would exclude them from life with God. Only a few paragraphs later in Luke 10, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to a religious expert who was trying to test him. Jesus positions the impure person who refused to welcome him as the exemplar of a righteous, godly love for one's neighbor. "You do not know what spirit you are of." You are not of the spirit in the mold of the powers and principalities who classify and separate; you are of the spirit that comes down from heaven as a chariot of fire that sets you free. "Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry me home."

Unsurprisingly, not much is known about the origins of that old negro spiritual Swing Low, Sweet Chariot. It was first written down in the early 1860's after a headmaster of a Choctaw boarding school heard some slaves singing it. Maybe these slaves had looked up from toiling in the fields under brutal, inhumane conditions with the threat of death always lurking and, looking out across the Mississippi river, longing for help and freedom, were reminded of Elijah on the banks of the Jordan. "I looked over Jordan and what did I see, coming for to carry me home." Maybe these slaves heard in that Bible passage the sweet, holy melody of Pentecost. Of a spirit very different from the world they inhabited, wholly foreign to the institutions that kept them enslaved. The spirit of that America was one of classification and separation by design. In the land of the free, black people were anything but. The Church was a critical institution undergirding this framework. The consensus of the ruling class was that unsupervised, unmediated reading of the bible by slaves led to rebellion. As a result, Black Episcopalians "were not allowed to exhort or expound scriptures in words of their own and to utter whatever nonsense might happen into their minds."<sup>1</sup> They were neither human nor holy. They too had no place to lay their heads. But still scripture sang. And these slaves recognized the tune where

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<sup>1</sup> Callahan, Allen Dwight, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 9.

others did not. While the world was consumed with spirits of violence and oppression, they sang of God's spirit. A spirit of incarnation, alighting upon Jesus at his baptism in the river Jordan. A spirit of righteousness that defied the social codes by resting upon those pronounced unclean. A spirit of fire, anointing the powerless. A spirit of hope, setting you free and taking you home. And not just an inspirational hope, but a real hope too. Swing Low, Sweet Chariot was used as a slave code for the underground railroad. "A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home."

You do not know what spirit you are of. Jesus' rebuke haunts me. How much has the spirit of this world remained unchanged? Do we really understand what spirit we are of? In the reading from Galatians, Paul summarizes our Pentecostal spirit: "For freedom Christ has set us free...for you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'...If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." This is the spirit we are of in Christ. This is the spirit we received at Pentecost. It is the same spirit that moved over the waters of the deep at creation. The same spirit that came over David dancing before the Lord. The same spirit that spoke through the prophets. The same spirit that anointed the Messiah to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release of the oppressed. The same spirit that comforted Jesus at the crucifixion, that raised him at the resurrection, that carried him up in the ascension. This is the spirit that we are of! Come, Holy Spirit! Swing low with your chariot of fire and your flaming horses and set us free from the spirit of this old, tired world. Come, set us free to love our neighbors, those who have been

marginalized by the categories of this place. Swing low, sweet spirit and help us show the world  
a new kingdom inaugurated in Christ. “Swing low, sweet chariot...”