

2 Kings 2:1-12

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.

A couple of years ago, someone I had gone to school with died unexpectedly. I had known him since at least third grade, and we hadn't been friends exactly, but we were often in the same classes and participated in the same activities and were on the same sports teams. We even both went into the Navy after graduation, though I didn't know that at the time. In truth, we hadn't spoken or seen each other in over 40 years except through social media. And yet, when he died it hit me kind of hard. And I'm still not 100% sure why. Like I said, we hadn't been close and he wasn't the first of my childhood classmates to die, sadly far from it. Maybe it was because he'd recently retired and completely reimaged his life. Maybe it was because he had been one of those really healthy and fit people. Maybe it was... I don't know, some weird quirk of my COVID experience.

Honestly, I don't think any of us are ever really prepared for the death of another, no matter how tenuous the connection. The famous poet John Donne wrote, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind." And as much as I take consolation and hope in God's promises of eternal life, every loss leaves a hole in our souls, a rent in the fabric of our being.

I used to visit a parishioner who was quite up there in years. The first time I met her she asked me, "why am I still here?" Probably because of good genes and good luck mostly. But she would always mention at some point in our visit, that she was ready to go. This kind of surprised me because even though her infirmities had drawn her world into a small circle of being, she was still very vibrantly alive. I think there's a lesson in that for us in some manner, occupying that place of being fully alive in the moment and yet still ready for God's call away from this life.

That certainly seem to be the place where Elijah is, and even though he doesn't technically die, his loss is like a death to those who have been left behind, because what Elisha is feeling is surely grief.

I think the best we can all do is to remember to be alive in the moments in which we find ourselves. To see that we have purpose and worth, no matter our limitations, to accept the gift of life with fervor and to allow grief it's due, but to not allow it to overcome us, to not allow it to dampen the vibrancy of our lives. Because of the passion of Christ, we have access to a love that can fill all the holes in our souls and can mend all the brokenness of our lives. And nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God.