

From Life to Life

February 14, 2021 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

2 Kings 2:1-12

Introduction: upon meeting someone important

This time, ten years ago, I was working as a chaplaincy resident at a large hospital in Toledo, Ohio. One of the most embarrassing moments that whole year was when I was asked to attend a meeting with top level doctors, administrators and nurses with a family who lost someone recently at the hospital. During the course of the meeting, one of the doctors asked me for comment and I was completely caught off guard, so I blurted out something about the importance of everyone loving each other and asking if anyone was hungry. Instantly I knew that I should have replied with "no comment". Everyone looked at me for a few seconds, made mental notes not to ever ask me a question about anything again and moved on with their meeting. It was a meeting full of important people, and I didn't know what to say. Today we consider some Scriptures that speak of meeting the most important person of all, the Lord. What would we say? One way or another, it will happen.

What happened to Elijah and Enoch

This Sunday is Transfiguration Sunday, on which Peter, James and John saw a vision of Jesus in heavenly glory, speaking with Elijah and Moses regarding the impending crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was another meeting with very important people. What those disciples overheard, or how they were able to recognize Elijah and Moses would be wonderful to know, but we are left to speculation about this. One of the many notable points to the episode is that Elijah, unlike Moses, did not suffer physical death but was taken bodily and alive into heaven. Witnessed only by his protegee, Elisha, but anticipated by many, Elijah is taken by a chariot of fire into heaven in the midst of a whirlwind. It was an event that had precedent. Back in Genesis 5:24, shortly before the episode of Noah and the Ark, Enoch lived, and is listed in Hebrews 11 (verse 5) as part of the Faith Hall of fame. He is said to have pleased God and was not, for God took him. This notion that God takes people, bodily and alive, into heaven is something that shows up at different points in Scripture, often not mentioned from pulpits because there are disagreements and controversy about certain points. But the Scriptures clearly present two cases in which this happened, and then it shows up again later in the New Testament.

What will happen to a generation of Christians

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

Why these two biblical heroes met their fate in this way is not explained in Scripture, but the New Testament brings several warnings that there will be a generation of Christians who will likewise enter heaven suddenly. First and Second Thessalonians are the earliest books of the New Testament and in it the Apostle Paul instructs the church of that town to anticipate meeting the Lord suddenly.

He wrote (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

It is a startling moment to realize that what took place in ancient times, first to Enoch, and then centuries later to the great prophet Elijah, will take place again. This time it will not be one

isolated individual but an entire generation of followers of Jesus Christ, and this momentous event will apparently take place without warning. In fact, the significant place this event holds in the two Thessalonian epistles, two of the very earliest in the New Testament, speak to the major place this holds in the teaching of the Apostle Paul. Apparently the Christians of Thessalonika had taken to the hills, expecting the return of the Lord Jesus as any day. Paul corrects their response, but does not dissuade them of their hope. Every generation of Christians has wondered if they are that generation, and we still do today.

The main point: The day will come when we meet the Master face to face.

The main point is that, one way or another, we leave this life and meet Jesus, who is our life, face to face. It is a theme that literally runs from Genesis through Revelation that the day will come when we all meet our Maker face to face, and that truth should be in the back of our minds whatever we do. We are always to be in a state of expectation. Mark Sugarman, the wonderful Jewish guide during my recent trip to Israel, once expressed his admiration for Christians. "You have been waiting for your rabbi to return for 2,000 years, and still you are faithful. In fact, your numbers are growing." So we remain, always ready to meet Christ face to face, and world-wide our numbers are growing. So how are we to act?

Go back to 1 Thessalonians 4

For that we go back to 1 Thessalonians, the earliest letter of the New Testament, in which the Apostle Paul told the church of that day to come down from the hills and get back to work. This is what he wrote regarding how we live as we await the move from life to life, from this world to meeting Christ face to face. Here's what he wrote in chapter 4 (verses 15-22):

"See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil." Being prepared for the day we meet Jesus involves what we do in everyday life.

Centuries ago, the great prophet Elijah was taken from life to life. He was flown via a fiery chariot bodily and alive into heaven. Centuries before him Enoch had the same experience. On this Transfiguration Sunday we consider that New Testament promise that they will not be alone in this experience and that we all, one way or another, will meet our Savior face to face. We live every day with that in the back of our mind.