

What Do We Need?

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 30, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14](#) and [Acts 1:6-11](#)

Copyright © 2019 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

Let me tell you a story that is so good for today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures that you may think it's made up. I can let you that I trust the source – *Sojourners* magazine – so I assume that it actually happened. To set the stage, I need to bring you back to 1979 when Jimmy Carter was President and a small group from Koinonia Farm (the Christian community that launched Habitat for Humanity) felt called to form a new Christian service community, one called Jubilee Partners.

“The first Jubilee families lived in tents as they worked on constructing houses. During their first hot, humid months of living and working outdoors without modern conveniences, they got a glimpse of the realities of refugees struggling to survive far worse situations. As a result, God gave the first Jubilee residents a vision to offer hospitality for such people, work that continues to this day.”¹

Four years later, in 1983, when Ronald Reagan was president and the Sandinistas had overthrown the U.S.-supported dictatorship in Nicaragua, violence was rampant throughout Central America. U.S.-backed Contras were attempting a counter revolution. Violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala gripped the nations and spilled across borders. This violence was largely in response to decades of U.S.-backed repression.² Just as the violence in that same region today is causing people to flee their homes and seek refuge in the United States, refugees came to the southern U.S. border seeking safety.

In July of that year, “members of Jubilee Partners took their bus to south Texas and picked up 35 refugees fleeing the terror in Central America. Planning to carry these ‘illegal aliens’ to their community in Georgia, they knew that they were breaking the law by doing so, but felt that their faith required this act of compassion.

“The morning of their departure from Texas dawned with dark thunderclouds overhead. They headed north, toward the dreaded Border Patrol checkpoint that lay ahead. They watched four tornado funnels touch down just off the highway. Wind swirled around them, tension grew, and conversation stopped as they drew up to the barricade.

“Yellow lights were flashing, and the area was full of Border Patrol vehicles, among them a bus with bars on its windows, used for hauling illegal refugees to a nearby detention center. The Jubilee members fought off the temptation to turn around and return the refugees to the hiding places from which they had emerged.

¹ “History,” *Jubilee Partners*, <https://www.jubileepartners.org/content/history> (accessed 29 June 2019).

² Get a much better and deeper sense of this history and how it is impacting international politics today at Cole Kazdin, “The Violence Central American Migrants Are Flying Was Stoked by the US,” *Vice News*, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qvnyzq/central-america-atrocities-caused-immigration-crisis (posted 27 June 2019; accessed 29 June 2019).

“When they slowed at the checkpoint, there was not a human being in sight. A few seconds later they were past the barricade and moving up the open highway to freedom. The bus exploded with spontaneous thanks to God in Spanish. ‘*Señor,*’ said a refugee, ‘now I know what the children of Israel felt like when they were coming out of the Red Sea!’”³ Their whirlwind experience reminded them of a pivotal story from the Hebrew scriptures.

Our scripture lesson is filled with such references. Elijah rolling up his mantle and striking the water with it causing it to part reminds us of Moses using his staff the part the Red Sea. Elijah and Elisha crossing the River Jordan reminds us of the Hebrews crossing the Jordan to occupy the ‘promised land.’ There’s even a reminder of Moses passing his authority to Joshua. And I sense in the whirlwind a reference to the Pillar of Smoke that guided the Hebrew people from slavery to freedom – both are a manifestation of the presence of God.

Literary allusions aside, some context might be helpful. “Elijah and Elisha were working in difficult times for Israel, the northern kingdom, about nine centuries before Jesus. The Omri dynasty, of which Ahab and his wife Jezebel are, alas, the most well-known representatives, was not a stellar time for God’s people up north. It required many a prophet, not just Elijah or Elisha, to speak against the Baal worship of the wicked or at least the weak King Ahab and his pagan wife.

“However, it wasn’t only the worship of false gods that got the Omri dynasty into trouble with Yahweh, because the kings of Israel often illustrated what Lord Acton would say so succinctly many centuries later, about power corrupting, and absolute power corrupting absolutely.

“... [N]one of this was pleasing in the eyes of God. By the time we reach the end of Elijah’s work, and the beginning of Elisha’s, the reigns of Ahab and then his son, Ahaziah, have both ended in death, and now Ahab’s other son, Jehoram, is king. Poor Jehoram will reap the consequences sown by his predecessors and will lose both his power and his place.”⁴ One might wonder if we are not now at least in part reaping the consequences of U.S. foreign policies carried out by our presidential predecessors.

“This second chapter in the second book of Kings appears to give away the ending of Elijah’s story when it mentions that God was about to take the prophet up in the whirlwind...

“However, we know that Elijah’s story goes on, ... [and] for Christians, his presence is felt in many ways in our New Testament. We may recall his appearance with Moses at the Transfiguration, or the perception that Jesus was calling for Elijah at his death, but even more significant is the way Jesus and his words and deeds made people remember Elijah.”⁵ And thanks to the Monday Morning Bible Study, I think Luke might have been using the Elijah/whirlwind story as an archetype for his stories of the Ascension of Christ.

³ Joyce Hollyday, “No Turning Back,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/no-turning-back?parent=47016> (accessed 29 June 2019).

⁴ Kathryn M. Matthews, “Sermon Seeds June 30 2019,” *United Church of Christ*, https://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_june_30_2019 (accessed 29 June 2019).

⁵ *Ibid.*

The characters in the story are interesting as well. Why does Elijah repeatedly tell Elisha to stay behind? And why does Elisha insist on staying with Elijah? Elisha knows that this is the day that Elijah will be taken from him. Is he being a good servant, staying with his master because, well, who knows what the master might need as the end approaches? Or is he sticking with his master because he knows that if he's with his master to the end, he will succeed him? Do you imagine Elisha saying, "I am *so* not letting you out of my sight until I get that mantle of authority placed on my shoulders!" or do you imagine him being more like a Samwise Gamgee to Elijah's Frodo Baggins?

The biblical scholars do not have a consensus about this.

When the time for their parting finally comes, Elijah makes an offer to Elisha: "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha asks, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." I've always read this as Elisha asking for twice as much faithfulness, twice as much trust, twice as much prophetic insight as Elijah had. It reminds me of Solomon asking God for wisdom (see 1 Kings 3). It turns out that I may have been missing something. Under Hebraic law, the elder son inherited a double portion, a double share of the estate upon the death of his father. If a father had three sons, the eldest would get half of the estate and his brothers would each get a quarter. Perhaps Elisha was asking Elijah to see him as a son, and not just as a son, but as an eldest son.⁶ Or, perhaps, my reading is more accurate.

"Keep your eyes on me, kid," Elijah replies, and the great dramatic moment of the story unfolds. A chariot of fire and horses of fire separate Elijah and Elisha, and a whirlwind sweeps up Elijah into heaven. Regardless of what we sang at the beginning of today's service, Elijah doesn't ride in the chariot of fire into heaven. The supernatural horses and chariot are there to separate Elijah and Elisha – perhaps to protect Elisha from the whirlwind? Whatever their purpose, their presence helps the whole episode to be filled with the presence of God, so filled that it spills off the page as we read it. The scene ends with Elijah gone and Elisha picking up his mantle – physically and metaphorically – and crossing the Jordan back into Israel.

On one level, I suppose this story is about leadership and transitions. But that aspect of the story isn't speaking to me today. What speaks to me today is Elisha's request of Elijah. Give me a double portion of your spirit. Elisha is going to take up Elijah's mantle, to carry on his ministry. What he thinks he needs is a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

It leaves me wondering what I need and what we need for our ministries in this age, in this day.

With children who have done nothing wrong caged up in unsanitary conditions by our own government, some of them dying, what do we need to carry out our ministry?

With neighbors who are deeply frightened by unhoused people, what do we need to carry out our ministry?

With children still being kicked out of their homes because they are LGBTQ+ and their parents are intolerant, what do we need to carry out our ministry?

⁶ *Ibid.*

With a planet baking and creatures going extinct, what do we need to carry out our ministry?

I believe that God is present in the whirlwind of current events. And I believe that God is calling us to prophetic ministries. God's words of justice and peace and healing need the amplification a church like ours can give. What do we need so we can take up this mantle?

What do we need?