

“Ascending Reflections”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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I want to start this sermon by reading an additional text. It’s not in the lectionary set for Ascension Day, but it tells of another, earlier ascension, and so I think we will find it relevant. 2 Kings Chapter 2; I’m going to jump around a little bit.

**2** Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. **2** 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.

**6** 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.

**8** 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, and the two of them crossed on dry ground.

**9** 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.” **10** 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.” **11** 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. **12** 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.

**13** He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. **14** He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water. He said, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah? Where is he?” He struck the water again, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha crossed over.

*May the living word of God speak through these ancient scriptures.*

Even though I usually do preach an Ascension Day sermon, I don’t think it had occurred to me, until this year, how much the story of Jesus’ ascension mirrors that of the prophet Elijah, many generations before. And it is not the only mirror we are presented with today.

I have never been in a house of mirrors. It’s not that they creep me out; it’s just that at carnivals, I have always chosen to spend my cherished tickets on rides, rather than on fun houses. At my gym, most of the walls have mirrors, and there is one wall that has a distorted mirror, which completely changes my shape. I typically avoid lifting weights or doing squats in front of that mirror.

When I was a child, I loved sitting on the bathroom counter; in the corner of the bathroom, by the sink, the medicine cabinet mirrored door would open and reflect back to me an eternity of reflections. This experience was even more dramatic when I tagged along with my mom shopping. Now her time in the dressing room very well could have been 5 minutes, but in my childlike sense of time, it might as well have been 5 hours. If I was lucky, at the end of the dressing room was a little platform, with a three-way folding mirror, meant for checking out an outfit from every angle. That platform is where I would place myself, and the world would disappear as I would fold the hinged mirrors so that they could enclose me into their triangle, and I would be suspended in an echoing fan of myself, Leah after Leah after Leah... Open, shut, open, shut, I would see myself grow larger and smaller, fewer and more of me.

In what way does the story of Jesus' ascension *mirror* that of Elijah? Well, in both stories, you have an important faith leader swept up into heaven. Elijah was a prophet to Israel during the years of the wicked King Ahab. Through miracles and prophecy, Elijah tried to convince Israel to return to the covenant, made through their ancestors, with their God. Some also knew Jesus as a prophet, though some saw him as a rabbi, some as a heretic, and some as the Messiah. No matter what angle people beheld his image, there was no doubt he left an imprint on those he encountered in first century Palestine.

Elijah was swooped into heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by chariots of fire and horsemen which separated him from the prophet Elisha, whom he had mentored.

Jesus had no fire, no whirlwind, no chariots, no horsemen. From the recollection in Acts, it sounds like Jesus levitated, accompanied by simply a cloud— which mirrors back to the time in Exodus, when Moses had ascended Mount Sinai, and a cloud covered Moses on the mountain, and a voice of God spoke to Moses out of the cloud. After he disappeared, two men in white robes appeared before the apostles, whose jaws had dropped to the ground as they gazed up to heaven, frozen in time and space. “Why are you looking up to heaven?” they asked the apostles. I wonder if these two men were the same men who appeared to the women who discovered the empty tomb on Easter morning, the men in dazzling white who asked the women, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Look, see here? Another mirror.

Both Elijah and Jesus left people behind. For Elijah, it was the prophet Elisha, whom he had mentored. “Give me a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha had begged his mentor Elijah before Elijah left him. After Elijah ascended, Elisha picked up the mantle— or cloak— Elijah had left behind. He used it to strike the water, which parted— just as Elijah had done, and just as Moses had done generations back when he parted the Red Sea. Mirror after mirror. Elisha would become a reflection of what his mentor taught and showed him.

Jesus left his apostles behind. And though he had been spoon-feeding them instructions, though he had been preparing them for the Holy Spirit, they were still gaping at the heavens, wondering what they were to do next. The two men in dazzling robes had to chide them, asking why they are looking up. What comes next? Well, they get to work *being* the church, living and

-serving as reflections of Christ and bringing his teachings and his love to wherever they could reach.

Sometimes I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and I do a double take, because I can see my mom's reflection. Even though she's no longer with me, physically, I know she is with me, because I can still feel the love she invested in me. It is something I get to use and is something from which I can draw comfort and strength.

The same is true of Jesus. If Elijah left Elisha his mantle as a symbol of power and prophecy, Jesus left us his love. And it is reflected in us; the more we are open to it, the more we shimmer with it, and fan out with reflections of generations of the faithful through whom God moved and challenged and spoke.

Jesus' ascension happened on the Mount of Olives in Bethany— a village about 2 miles from Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives was where the prophet Zechariah predicted the Day of the Lord would come, where God would reign over all the earth. Bethany is also the village where Jesus began his journey on Palm Sunday, into Jerusalem, on a donkey. Interesting that Jesus ends his earthly journey there, in that donkey-village, and not in Jerusalem, where the Messiah was expected to reign. It's like a mirror reversal of the Palm Sunday route, and it turns the notions of salvation on its head.<sup>1</sup>

As a child, I used to wonder what the triangle of mirrors looked like with nothing in it. I would crawl under the mirrors, lying on my back and looking up, to see if I could spy on reflections of nothing. But inevitably a piece of me would make it into the reflection: a swoop of my curls, a nose, an ear and a cheek. Looking back, I guess that it's like the question of whether a tree that falls in the forest with no one around makes a sound. It probably doesn't matter.

But we DO matter to the legacy of Jesus Christ. We carry his reflection into the future and reflect his presence and love of the past. Let nothing distort that truth.

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<sup>1</sup> SALT Project Lectionary Blog "Lectionary Commentary for Ascension Sunday" May 10, 2021  
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/17/ascension-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-ascension-sunday>