

Christian Maturity and the “Peter Pan Syndrome”

J. Barry Vaughn. June 26, 2022.

“When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.’ And Elisha said, ‘I pray you, let me inherit a double share of your spirit.’ And he said, ‘You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if you do not see me, it shall not be so.’ And as they still went on and talked, behold a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he creid, ‘My father, my father! the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!’ And he saw him no more.” (2 Kings 2.9-12)

“I’ll NEVER grow up, never GROW up, never grow UH-UP, not me!” So sang Mary Martin in *Peter Pan*, J.M. Barrie’s play about the boy who didn’t want to grow up. It was one of my favorite shows when I was a little boy. I wanted to be one of the children who were sprinkled with fairy dust and flew with Peter out of the nursery window to Never-never Land... “east of the sun and west of the moon”. But ultimately, Peter Pan is a very sad story. Wendy and her brothers and the Lost Boys who return with them do grow up, but Peter never does.

Human beings are programmed to grow up. We’re not supposed to remain children forever. And that is just as true spiritually as it is physically.

However, before I talk about what the story of Elijah, Elisha, and the fiery chariot have to do with growing up, I want to review the story of Elijah with you.

The Old Testament is unknown territory for most church goers. Like some of you, I grew up in the Baptist church, and along the way I got a big dose of the Old Testament. As soon as I could read, I started working my way through the Children’s Storybook Bible, and I loved the Old Testament. The Old Testament was full of war and violence, good guys and bad guys, the Israelites and the Canaanites, King David, King Solomon, and all the rest.

The story of Elijah the prophet is a multi-scene drama:

First, he confronts King Ahab and condemns the worship of idols;

Second, he flees into the wilderness where God sends ravens to feed him

Third, a poor widow shares her last bit of food with him, but God miraculously multiplies the meal and oil in her pantry;

Fourth, the widow’s son dies, but Elijah restores him to life;

Five, Elijah challenges the prophets of the pagan deity Baal to a contest; each

pray to their god to send heavenly fire down to their altar; success will determine who is worshiping the true God. Elijah succeeds and the prophets of Baal are put to death.

Six, Elijah flees into the wilderness again where God appears to him, not in the earthquake or in the storm, but in a “still, small voice.”

Finally, Elijah bestows his powers upon his disciple, Elisha, and is carried to heaven, riding in a chariot of fire drawn by fiery horses in the midst of a whirlwind.

Now tell me: what little boy or girl wouldn't love a story like that?

It wouldn't take much for a Hollywood producer to turn Elijah into a superhero. But that would be a complete misinterpretation of his story.

The story in today's Old Testament reading has little to do with Elijah's ascent to heaven in a UFO, but it has everything to do with growing up and becoming an adult.

Elisha was Elijah's disciple or pupil. Elisha insisted on following Elijah around. Elijah went to Bethel and told Elisha to stay in Gilgal, but Elisha responded, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you”. Twice more Elijah tried to move on by himself, but Elisha insisted on following him. It took divine intervention in the form of a fiery chariot to separate the prophet and his disciple.

I think this story tells us something very important about the relationship between a teacher and a student or a parent and a child. A student is not supposed to remain with his or her teacher forever, nor a child with a parent. There comes a time when the student and the child must strike out on their own, and if this time never comes, then something is wrong: Either the teacher or parent is clinging to the student or child in an unhealthy way, or the student or child continues to remain in an immature relationship with their teacher or parent.

The great sign of maturity is that we have learned those things that we were supposed to learn from our teachers and parents and have incorporated those in our lives. When that happens then we are supposed to strike out on our own. It is a difficult, even painful moment, for both the child and the parent, but it is a necessary and inevitable pain.

The story ended happily. After Elijah ascended into heaven, Elisha picked up his master's mantle or coat and wrapped it around himself. Then, like Elijah before him, he was able to command the Jordan to part as he walked across it. He had learned the lessons Elijah had to teach him, or to use the Bible's phrase, he had received the “double share” of Elijah's spirit that he asked for.

Whose mantle have you picked up and put on? Who has given you a double portion of their spirit? If we are lucky, we have had parents who taught us their lessons and gave us their spirit. There may also have been teachers who have done the same for us. If we have really learned those lessons, then we will be capable of standing on our own. We will be capable of performing those deeds that we saw our parents and teachers doing during our childhood or apprenticeship.

Healthy parents want their children to grow up, get an education, find a career, and develop lives of their own. Healthy parents want their children to become independent and learn how to think for themselves, even if that means developing ideas that are different from their parents.

And the same is true of healthy religions.

In Buddhism there is a puzzling and slightly horrifying saying: If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him. Why in the world would Buddhists be encouraged to kill the Buddha if they meet him? Well, what I think that saying means is that each Buddhist has the potential to become a Buddha, and that they are not to look for the Buddha out there somewhere but within each Buddhist heart.

One of the dangers of religion and religious people is that we are tempted to remain children. Religions often try to make their adherents children forever. Too often religion can be used to infantilize and make us dependent on an institution or its clergy.

I would not be surprised if most of you know of a church or religious leader who has tried to manipulate his followers (and it's usually a male leader who does this, although there are plenty of women leaders who have tried to do the same). If your church or your pastor has insisted that you never deviate from his teaching or that you endanger your financial stability by giving too much money to the church or if you have ever been in a church that would not allow you to ask questions, then you have been spiritually infantilized. And churches that behave in that way are well on their way to becoming cults.

Properly understood, however, Christianity does not infantilize its members. Rather, the message of Christianity is that each of us is supposed to grow into the image of Christ. Our goal as Christians is to resemble Christ more and more closely. He is the standard against which we must measure ourselves. It may be an impossible standard, but it is nevertheless an ambitious goal.

Years ago theologian James Fowler wrote a book that many of you may know: *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. According to Fowler, spiritual immaturity is characterized by an over-literal understanding of the Bible. In other words, a child or spiritually immature person thinks of God as an old man with a beard who lives in the clouds. Religion is a matter of rules or laws that must be followed. Spiritual maturity, on the other

hand, recognizes that there is ambiguity, that there may be more than one answer to the great questions of life, and that truth and wisdom can be found in all the great religions or spiritual systems.

But I think perhaps the best description of spiritual maturity is in today's second reading: "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit".

After Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle and received Elijah's spirit, he was able to do the miracles that Elijah had done. Can we expect to do the works that Jesus did if we learn his lessons faithfully? Will we find ourselves multiplying loaves and fishes and walking on water? I don't know about the loaves and fishes or walking on water, but there are deeds of power that every Christian should be able to do. If we have been faithful in the school of Christ, then we should find ourselves loving our neighbors, forgiving our enemies, returning good for evil, trusting God for our daily needs, and giving of ourselves to others.

For like Elijah, we, too, have been given a new spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, through whom Jesus becomes our "Eternal Contemporary", the unseen guest at every meal and the invisible companion on all our journeys.