

Message for February 14, 2021

Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9

This last Sunday before Lent is Transfiguration Sunday. This is that day. All three of the synoptic gospels - that is Matthew, Mark and Luke - tell a story of Peter, James, and John accompanying Jesus to the top of a holy mountain. There, before their eyes, Jesus is transfigured or transformed into a dazzling brightness. In the eyes of the wider church, it is seen as a miracle of Jesus, unique in that the miracle happens to Jesus himself. This is a pivotal moment where Jesus fulfills a prophecy of the Hebrew Bible, where Elijah will return.

We've talked about this story before. How bizarre it seems. So weird that there must be a reason that it is included in our Scripture stories. Whether or not it is true. The presence of Peter, James and John, is important. In Biblical times, the presence of 2 or 3 witnesses makes an account legally binding. So, whether or not it was an historical account or shared and intense religious experience, doesn't really matter. There is truth in the story, whether or not the facts are true. These would be incredibly difficult events to describe the writers would be limited by our words, or lack of them. We, in our readings, are limited by the translations and time. There are multiple layers of distance between these accounts and our understandings of them.

First, we have the prophet Elijah taken up in a whirlwind, but not without Elisha tagging along for the journey. Elijah keeps trying to tell Elisha to stay behind, but Elisha refuses. They go to Bethel, where the prophets there tell Elisha that Elijah is going to be taken up to heaven. Elisha basically says, "Yes, I know. Hush up." The same thing happens when Elijah goes to Jericho—he tries to get Elisha to stay behind, Elisha refuses, the prophets in Jericho tell Elisha what is going to happen, and Elisha tells them he knows and to shush. Then they go on to the Jordan River, and Elijah tells Elisha that God is sending him on, but Elisha says he will go with him. Elisha refuses to let go.¹ Why is that?

¹ <http://rev-o-lution.org/worship-resources-for-february-14th-2021-transfiguration-sunday/>

Does he not want the change that he knows is coming? Likely not, if we think about it. Debie Thomas points out that these tales of Transfiguration are not happy stories. Each one conveys bewilderment and loss. Why? Because embedded in each is a threshold. A change. A boundary line marking a “before” and an “after.” And let’s face it: we human beings rarely cross thresholds without hesitation. Thomas elaborates: Sometimes we cross over in grief, already pining for what we’re leaving behind. Sometimes we move forward in fear, convinced that whatever lies ahead will be beyond our capacity to handle. Sometimes we refuse to cross over at all until raw, wrenching necessity forces us to put one foot in front of the other.²

This is us, this past year. One foot in front of the other. Carefully, reluctantly. There is BC (before COVID) and after. And as much as we want things to go back to the way they were. There is no going back. As difficult as it is, we know that things must change. This pandemic has exposed so much that wasn’t working. Or worse, the systems that were working exactly as they were designed, oppressive and prejudicial. Profiting off the vulnerable, prioritizing productivity over personhood.

No wonder the disciples wanted to build houses and stay on that mountain top forever. They have gone with Jesus to find solitude. This is the “before”. What they find on that hill shifts them into the “after.” They experience and understand Jesus in a way that they hadn’t before.

Not only that, but now Moses and Elijah have joined him. These two figures of faith. Both of whom sought and experienced the fullness of God. Moses, the giver of the Law, the one who asked God for reassurance of God’s presence. Elijah, the prophet, who fled to the wilderness, found God in the stillness after the earthquake. The places that Elijah and Elisha wnet, they traced the history of the people. Bethel, the holy place, then Jericho, the triumphant place, then the Jordan, the starting place. A journey back to the beginning. Now Jesus stands among Moses and Elijah, reminding us of the history of all

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2917>

God's people - how far we have come and what we still have to do. Because after all this, Jesus leads us back down the mountain.

Maybe we did want to stay there. That thin place where the line between heaven and earth is blurry, the point where human nature meets God. Except that Jesus is that point. Anna Atkinson draws our attention to the difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel. While Elijah is taken up into heaven, Jesus *stays on earth*. She calls this the best illustration of the Good News. The disciples get to see Jesus in all of his divinity. Then they go with him while he continues to live in all of his humanity. This is the real challenge that we face. To know the Divine, the beauty and the potential, then to live in the world in all of our humanity.

Because the Transfiguration is not just an event, it is a commentary on who we are to become as Christians. To see Jesus in all of his glory, is to be awe-struck by the transformative power of faith. We might want to stay in that peaceful place of prayer or meditation. We are uplifted by the quirky conversations and the sharing of good feelings during coffee time after church. Then, we are called back into the world. We cannot take refuge forever. We can be inspired by the prophets, to pick up their legacy. If we do not know how to do that, we need only look to the Scriptures.

We can be like Peter, stunned, afraid, but still doing our best. Not knowing what to say or where to begin, but still trying. Awed and grateful to have been a part of such a holy moment, but knowing that gratitude needs to be acted upon and so willing to follow Christ to new understanding and experiences. We can be like Elisha who shows amazing persistence and tenacity. He goes with Elisha. Maybe out of his own grief and denial. But maybe out of a sense of loyalty and love - gratitude for this person with whom he has spent the past several years, who has mentored him. This is a hard thing for both of them and he journeys with Elijah. He keeps saying "you will not do this alone, I am going with you."

How do you walk down from mountain top experiences into the reality of life?

How do we keep the history and importance of the “before times” and live into creating a new world in the “after times”?