

Mark 9:2-9 (NRSV)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Transfiguration is a kind of a hinge in the Christian year, midway between Christmas and Easter. It marks the end of Epiphany, a season of light and revelation and the beginning of Lent, a season of reflection and introspection. I have probably preached on the Transfiguration more than any other topic except John the Baptizer, since it appears every year and all of the pastors who trained me pushed it off on me to preach – my teaching parish, my internship (both years), I think I've preached on the Transfiguration a half a dozen times.

But it is the genius of Scripture and the lectionary that something new always appears – this year for me, I was just entranced by the wonderful story of Elijah and Elisha from the book of 2 Kings. This is just a gem. It isn't hard to see why this story is selected to be matched with Transfiguration. Elijah is, of course,

mentioned as one of Jesus' conversation partners. He is available to consult with Jesus because he was taken up into heaven upon his death and the text from 2 Kings tells us about that story.

But the parallels and connections between the Transfiguration and the ascension of Elijah go deeper than that. As many of you know, the disciples never look very good in the Gospel of Mark. They usually don't get the point of things. They usually talk when they should listen and are silent when they should speak. The Transfiguration is no exception. Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah, the two prophets in Judaism who are supposed to appear before the world is decisively changed and now there they are.

Jesus is clothed in dazzling white and talks with Moses and Elijah. And Peter pipes in, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here – let us make 3 dwellings." Here we are with the greatest figures of the New and Old Testament and Peter wants to do a building campaign. Of course, I'm not opposed to building campaigns, but you really do need to pick the right moments to bring them up.

Mark, who doesn't usually make apologies for the disciples, does this time. He implicitly notes how inappropriate Peter's comment is. Mark writes that Peter "did not know what to say, for they were terrified." But even so, Peter's instinct is wrong. Jesus won't be revealed and confirmed as a Messiah by wearing dazzling clothes on a mountaintop. Jesus will be revealed as Messiah on a hill called Golgotha, hanging on a cross. He won't be between two prophets, but rather between two thieves.

What's interesting is that the disciple who gets it right is not Peter, but rather Elisha in the Old Testament reading. Remember the setting. Elijah is a mighty prophet of Israel around the 9th Century before Christ. He calls for a drought, he defeats the prophets of Baal, he condemns the king of Israel. He is a mighty prophet and he calls Elisha to be his disciple.

In today's reading, the time comes for Elijah to be called up into heaven on a whirlwind. For whatever reason, Elijah wants to leave Elisha behind, but Elisha refuses to be parted from him. So they depart from Gilgal on the River Jordan to go to Bethel, some miles to the west. There they meet a company of prophets who ask Elisha whether he knows that his mentor, Elijah, is being taken away today. He says yes, he knows, and tells them to be quiet. Why does he tell them to be quiet? We don't know, really, but to me it feels like he's just trying to keep it together and doesn't want to be reminded that his master is leaving.

They arrive at Bethel and Elijah again tries to leave Elisha and Elisha again refuses. They go back to Jericho only a couple miles from their starting point in Gilgal. This journey seems to be pointless, perhaps a test of Elisha's loyalty.

The prophets at Jericho ask Elisha whether he knows that his master will be taken away today and Elisha's probably starting to grind his teeth. He says yes, be quiet. Elijah tries a last time to make Elisha wait behind and Elisha again refuses. Elijah rolls up his mantle, which is his long robe outer-garment, and strikes the water. The river parts, recalling the parting of the Red Sea and the entry of Joshua into the Promised Land and they cross over. Elisha has passed the test.

Elijah asks what he can do for Elisha before leaving and Elisha makes a strange request, for a double share of Elijah's spirit. What he is really asking for is the inheritance that an eldest son would receive, a double share – he is asking to become the successor to Elijah as God's prophet to Israel. This is a gift that Elijah cannot grant, that is only God's to grant. I extended the reading a couple of verses so that it is made clear that Elisha does indeed receive the double share. After Elijah is taken up into heaven, Elisha takes up his mantle. My guess is that this is where the phrase "taking up the mantle" originates. He strikes the river with the mantle asking,

“Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” My God are you here with me? Am I called to be Elijah’s successor? And God parts the waters and Elisha has his answer.

Let’s imagine that these two texts, the ascension of Elijah and the Transfiguration, are placed side-by-side for a reason, and let’s imagine that the reason is to compare successful and unsuccessful discipleship, Elisha’s successful discipleship and Peter’s unsuccessful discipleship. Now, we know that Peter will be a great disciple in the end, the rock of the church, but at this point, he’s still got a lot to learn. What do we learn by comparing the actions, the strategies of Elisha and Peter?

There are some obvious differences. Elisha is faithful. Peter is fearful. Elisha asks for what he needs, Peter asks for appearances. Elisha wants to get back to work, returning to Israel on the other side of the Jordan. Peter wants to stay on the mountaintop. A life of discipleship is not a life on a mountaintop, far away from the cares and concerns of everyday life. Jesus knows this. Peter will learn it.

And there’s a further difference. Jesus and Elijah are both changed, and Elisha seeks to be changed as well. In the Transfiguration, Peter does not yet seek to be changed so much as to be entertained. But discipleship is not a spectator sport. Discipleship is all about participation, about change, about being changed, about having the courage to ask to be changed. About being transformed. Being transfigured. Elisha knew this. Peter would learn it.

The ascension of Elijah and the Transfiguration are two of the great stories of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. These stories form our shared inheritance as the People of God. As we move into Lent in our Wednesday night Soup and Study we'll share and discuss the core stories of the Old and New Testament. We'll share the stories of the calling of Abraham and Sarah, of the Exodus, the entry into the Promised Land, the stories of David's Rule, stories of conquest and exile, and the stories of Jesus and the Cross and Resurrection Life. These stories are the treasures of our faith and the people of God are instructed to learn these stories, to tell these stories to one another, to teach them to our children, to hold them close to our hearts. As we journey through Lent, let's do that together.

Amen.