

February 23, 2020

II Kings 2: 1-12

Matthew 17: 1-9

Just Watching

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Let's start with the strange and very ancient story of the prophet Elijah and his chosen successor, the tongue-twistingly-named Elisha.

Elijah, ancient Israel's most revered prophet, had the difficult and dangerous job of calling out the God-less corruption of the government of his time, nearly three millennia ago (in case you thought that was only a more modern phenomenon). He nearly starved to death in the desert while hiding from vicious rulers whose names have become synonymous with despotism: Ahab and Jezebel. But Elijah was also the one who was granted that remarkable revelation that you might remember from Sunday School or a good sermon¹: when he took shelter in a mountain cave while God passed by – and there was a mighty wind, and then an earthquake, and then fire– but God was not in any of those; and, then after all that, only “a still, small voice” – as though God's vastness were so nimble and sublime that it could even clothe itself in a whisper.

But now we're at the end of Elijah's career, and – as everyone in this morning's story already seems to have figured out – he is about to be “taken away,” and Elisha is following along with him on a journey deeper and deeper into the wilderness, to a place where – well, where something conclusive is going to happen. And all of this is being watched from a respectful distance by “the company of prophets” who constitute a kind of movement of resistance to the evil that had run amok in the world of that time.

Three times, while they're traveling together, Elijah turns to Elisha and says, “are you sure you're up for this? You could turn back now...” And three times Elisha says, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” Elisha both knows and doesn't know the implications of what's coming: somehow, when it's finished, he will be alone.

¹ I Kings 19.

By the time they're on the far side of the Jordan – at the great unmapped edge of the world where Moses was last seen and where John the Baptist would someday appear – Elijah turns to his companion one final time and says, “Tell me what you need, before I am gone.” Elisha has begun to realize that the mantle is about to fall to him – so he asks for a “double share” of the prophet’s spirit; he knows he’ll need at least that in order to do what’s going to need to be done. “You have asked a hard thing,” Elijah says; “but if you can stay and watch what’s about to happen, you’ll find what you need.” Elijah knows that counter-intuitive thing: that the way to find the inspiration you need is to look unblinkingly toward the heart of the very thing that you fear, and to steer right into it. What’s being asked of the one who’ll be left to continue is something that’s hard – but it’s *not* out of reach. And it will require clarity about what is happening, honesty about the loss that it represents, courage for the change that’s coming – and faithfulness to the work that remains still to be done.

Let’s pause here long enough to name a remarkable resonance. As a congregation, you know a lot about coming a long way on an arduous journey through what feels like wilderness to a place where a leader is suddenly gone. You know what Elisha learns: that the change isn’t so much the end of anything as it is the beginning of something else; the way forward is daunting, and will become a bit inscrutable for a while though, God knows, the stakes are as high as ever, or higher. And – as you know now – the courage and the stamina to do the work from that point come from staring the loss, the change, the uncertainty right in the eye, and steering straight for them with full confidence in the double portion of Spirit that God offers to this ‘company of prophets,’ this movement of yours to plant the seeds of justice and gentleness and hope – hope most of all – in the yearning fields of this city and its great university, this nation and this world.

Elijah, remarkably, also shows up in the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

It’s a big stride, across nine centuries from the fiery chariot in the wilderness to the mountain of Transfiguration, and you could hardly be blamed for feeling a bit of chronological whiplash in meeting Elijah in both places. But the people Israel have always felt that Elijah was a particularly agile character – to the point where, as perhaps you know, to this day they still set a place for him at the *seder* table on Passover, where his return is always

expected to announce the fruition, at last, of the work that's never quite been finished. (I guess that if you were last seen ascending in a fiery chariot, there's no telling when or how you might show up in the future.)

Anyway, here is Elijah on the mount of transfiguration, making common cause with Jesus and Moses – and with those awe-struck fishermen watching through the haze of glory, like Elisha watching the fiery chariot maybe, trying to figure out what the special effects mean, and what the implications might be for them. You can hardly blame Peter for proposing that it might be a good thing for them to mark the spot by building a sort of shrine, “three dwellings” or booths, as the text says – as a way to commemorate the religious experience, a way to hang onto a moment of dazzling clarity in the midst of work whose destination seemed, sometimes murky, most times daunting.

It's interesting that we've made a holy day out of an event about which Jesus sternly instructed those who witnessed it to say nothing – at least, not until “after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” We can almost hear Jesus saying to the fishermen, on the way back down the mountain, *what you just experienced isn't going to make sense to you for a while*. And, indeed, the gospel says they continued to turn what they saw and heard on the mountaintop over and over in their minds, wondering what it might eventually come to mean. When, finally, Jesus was raised from the dead, it's interesting that it could hardly have been less like the Transfiguration: no heavenly voices, or apparitions of religious celebrities, and God wearing, not luminous robes, but just whispers by the subtle light of deep dawn on a Sunday morning...

I'm getting ahead of the story, I know, with all this talk about Easter – but not really. The Transfiguration story, as we heard, begins with the words, “Six days later Jesus took ... Peter and James and John ... up a high mountain by themselves.” Six days after – what? After he had had a conversation with them that caused its own waves of dismay: the first time he broke the news to them that he himself would be taken away from them. “He began to show them,” says the gospel narrator just before our story begins, “that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the religious authorities, and be killed.” (16:21) It didn't go over well. Maybe, if he'd said to them, like Elijah, “Tell me what you need, before I'm gone,” they might have replied, *show us where this is all leading! Dazzle us with some confirmation that we'll be able to do what'll be asked of us when we get there*. No wonder the church, down through the ages, has wanted to remember that mountaintop moment of illumination as a counterpoint to a daunting transition and a lot of unfinished work. The memory of glory only makes sense when the ones who remain look back to see that it was when they took hold of the best clarity and honesty and courage they could muster – *As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will never leave you* – that they found, in and among themselves, the wherewithal to keep the movement alive – found what they needed to lead what they started out just watching.

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Here's a much smaller stride across history: back just fifty-two years – fifty-two years ago *right now*, in fact – when the sanitation workers in the city of Memphis, Tennessee were on strike to press their city for humane working conditions and a living wage, and face down the vicious despot Jim Crow. By about this time, that winter, their non-violent sit-ins and work stoppages had started to capture the imagination, not only of Memphis, but of the whole nation. You all know how that story comes out. Martin Luther King, Jr. made his way to Memphis, to try to help them hold a delicate balance between supporting the workers and keeping the simmering possibility of violence at bay. It was a volatile situation, a difficult and dangerous time to stand for justice; if you read about it in retrospect, people seemed to know what might happen. Even Dr. King. On the night of April 3 he put what seemed like a double share of spirit into a sermon in which he said, "...I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life – longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now..." To a room full of Peters and Jameses and Johns and Marys and Marthas and Lydias he said, "I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." People may have come that night thinking they were standing on a flat place, just watching the next chapter of the struggle play out. Maybe it took them a little while to realize that they'd been taken up a mountain – a little while to turn those words about the promised land over and over in their heads, wondering what they meant, what the implications were for them. The last words of that speech on April 3, fifty-two years ago – the last words most of us ever heard Dr. King say, were words of testimony to transfiguration – from the old hymn: "My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The story of that night seems to be about Dr. King – just like the story of the Transfiguration seems to be about the glory that enveloped Jesus. But I've been turning the stories of those things that happened over and over in my head, and what keeps happening is that I end up focused on a different transfiguration. In the end, the stories do seem to be about glory. But the real glory is the sight of those flummoxed, tremulous, spirit-hungry people, bereft of a leader, staring straight into the uncertainty of what now lies ahead. The real glory comes when they make eye contact with what looks like a terrible loss and find that they do actually have the clarity and the honesty and the courage and faithfulness to become, themselves, a company of prophets. The real transfiguration comes when, right at the outer edge of the world they know, those people realize that, holding fast to the strong and permanent company of Jesus, having been touched by Jesus, having heard his voice urging them not to be afraid, they find that their eyes have seen the glory: they have indeed received a double portion of Spirit, and so they end up ready to lead what they started out just watching.

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