

Up a High Mountain, Apart
Mark 9:2-9; II Kings 2:1-18
The Transfiguration of the LORD

Mark 9:2-9

²Six 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, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then 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.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

⁹As 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.

II Kings 2:1-18

¹Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

²Elijah 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.

³The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?”

And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”

⁴Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho.

⁵The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?”

And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”

⁶Then 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.

⁷Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.

⁸Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

⁹When 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.”

¹⁰He 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.”

¹¹As 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.

¹²Elisha 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.

¹³He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?”

When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

¹⁵When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.”

Prayer

O God, on this day when liturgical tradition has Churches throughout the world observing your transfiguration and praying for our own,

and three days from the day when liturgical tradition has us entering into the most solemn and reflective time of the church year on Ash Wednesday,

we have on our minds—many of us—the bracing reality of human life, and all life on earth: that nothing that we can see lasts forever, and none of us is immortal.

We celebrate your restoration to life, a celebration for which we can only prepare ourselves adequately by entering into the disciplines of Lent.

So we come to you, helpless but for what you give us, with open hands, and open minds, and open hearts, trusting in your promise of true life, new life, eternal life.

So share your word with us now, O God, we humbly pray. It is the only thing we know that can defy the tyranny of time. Amen.

The Sermon

Through a midnight prairie landscape, we rode together in silence, two young men from among a group of acquaintances who all lived on the same floor in a dormitory at Indiana University.

The driver’s name was Rob. He and I were of similar demographics—two 18-year-old white guys from the Midwest whose families could afford to send them to college. Other than that, we didn’t have much in common. I liked books and music. Rob liked tractors and football. And not books.

We had dropped another guy off at the airport in Indianapolis, and I had been wondering on that trip, as a closet introvert: what in the world are Rob and I going to talk about, just the two of us in the car for the hourlong road trip back to school?

So as we took off from the airport, I was relieved to find under the passenger seat Rob's tape collection. This was the 80s—I mean the 1980s—when young people tended to carry small cases of cassette tapes in their cars, and Rob, not surprisingly, had the most popular music of the time in his. Miraculously, I found one that I'd been wanting to hear by a band called The Police. I got it out and pushed it into in the tape player.

Out into the country we went, and darkness began to fall, and music filled the car while the timeless Indiana foothills and the vast midwestern plains passed by our windows.

It turned out it was no wonder I'd been wanting to hear that tape. It was one of the biggest-selling albums in the country, by one of the most popular bands in the world, but the words were full of mysticism:

“We are spirits in the material world.”ⁱ

“There has to be an invisible sun / that gives its heat to everyone...
It gives us hope when the whole day's done.”ⁱⁱ

“One world is enough for all of us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“When you've made your secret journey /
You will be a holy man.”^{iv}

That's from four different songs, three of which had major radio play. This had been the #2 record in America.

It amazed me that Rob's world of the most popular music on the radio, and my inner world of introspection and reflection, had met and meshed so wonderfully during that time.

Eventually, we pulled into the campus parking lot and re-entered the everyday world of our home away from home. But as we did so, I had a feeling of deep gratitude for our time together. I felt like somehow we had bonded on that journey through the enchanting darkness, two young men whose lives stretched out in front of them with endless possibilities and just enough light to see our way through whatever landscapes our futures might bring us to.

A few weeks later, in the middle of an everyday conversation, I casually mentioned how great that night ride had been, and Rob revealed that he'd hated it.

Hated the trip, hated the music, didn't enjoy anything about being "out in the middle of nowhere," and had spent the whole time trying to figure out why I wasn't saying anything.

So much for the mystical bonding of a secret journey.

Sometimes, I guess, one person's mystical experience is another person's boring non-event.

Two nice codas to that story: Rob and I still got along, and I got a whole lot wiser.

But you know something? I have no idea where or, really, who that kid Rob is anymore. Honestly, I can't even remember his last name, and I don't feel a need to recover it. But when I happen to think of him, or that year, or that music, or that patch of Indiana that we traversed, my mind and my heart go back to the silent secret journey, and I celebrate the bond that definitely existed in my mind between that guy and myself. It remains a sacred hour in my life, and I find myself wishing that guy well all the time, wherever and whoever he may be now.

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.

And he was transfigured—the Greek word is where we get the term "metamorphosis"^v—and his clothes became dazzling white; and Moses and Elijah appeared, many centuries after their lifetimes, and they were talking with Jesus.

None of the evangelists bothers to explain how the disciples knew it was Moses and Elijah.

Maybe all we need to know is what they knew, which was that something profoundly special was taking place, if only for a moment, right before their eyes:

something mystical,
something that illuminated,

something with the power to shock them,
grip them,
disorient them,
and throw them off their game;
something to which the activist human instinct
is to respond with action;
something that made at least one of them
want to put boxes around it,
as if that would preserve the moment
and the circumstances
and the power of that mystical experience forever.

One of the wonderful things about the story of the Transfiguration is that, like many other stories in the Bible, it's never comprehensively explained. It is at least debatable as to whether there's any moral to the story; and, in any case, it's handled a little bit differently by Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Jesus simply takes James, Peter and John—as Mark, Luke and Matthew take you and me—up a high mountain, apart, where something holy, something mysterious, something dazzling happens.

And while Jesus is the one who is transfigured, it's hard to believe that that small subset of disciples wouldn't also find themselves somehow transformed, simply by having been there.

Deeper than memory are the powerful feelings, locked in suspended animation as if preserved in amber, that are only awakened when we linger over memories of people or places or times in our lives when our surroundings and our senses crackled with electricity.

I lived in England for a year between college and seminary, and it was the first time that I was a full-time servant of the church, and I went to places deep inside that I had never been to before.

There are dozens of adjectives that I can give the experience of that year—powerful, transformative, enriching—but there are very few words, if any, that are adequate to describe the deeper feeling.

There is something haunting, almost dangerous, about the memory of feeling that returns to me at those occasional times when a hesitating glance at a photograph, or coming across an old letter, or hearing a snippet of a song, leads my mind down a path to a place where I am not just recalling details, but am, in a way, submerged in the memory of the feeling of the experience.

And it's all right that there are no adequate words for it, because I know two things: one, everybody has a place or a person or a time or a thing or an idea that means that much to them; and two, for each of us, that experience is singular. It's like there is kind of a box around that sacred space where you have been, or that irreplaceable relationship in your life, or that sanctified time in your life, when something holy and calling and life defining took place for you.

Peter's problem is the all-too-human desire to put a literal box around it.

“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

All of the Evangelists know that's a dumb idea; and maybe Peter knows it's a dumb idea as soon as it's out of his mouth; but they all kind of get where Peter's coming from, so they're not too rough on him:

Matthew just has Peter say it, and then the voice of God comes booming in;^{vi}

Luke says he said it, but then says protectively, “he didn't really know what he was saying.”^{vii}

Mark says, “Peter said it because he didn't really know *what* to say; I mean, they were *terrified*...”

But they all seem to kind of cover for old Peter when he says it, maybe because they can all kind of relate: “I've got the most amazing thing in the universe going on right in front of me; *of course* I want to build boxes for it, booths, dwelling places: some container to keep this person, place, time and event just as it is, so it will never go away.”

They all get it.

But they know that it can never be like that.

The beauty of our advancing through time and experiencing life is also the tragedy of it.

Maybe in the back of Peter's mind is the thought: how can we stop time, so that Jesus and these other two, and we here in this now-sacred space and experience, can just keep this going on, just like this?

It was right before this scene in Mark when Jesus had begun to teach that the Son of Man would have to undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

And Peter had taken him aside and rebuked him: "Don't say that! Don't tell me that!"

I project a lot onto Peter; in my mind, he's one of my older brothers, the one who never lost a street fight. The two of us were walking in town one time, and a rough-looking guy with biceps out to here walked past, and I said, "That guy could put me on the ground in about half a second." And my brother, without ever breaking stride, said, "Not while I'm here." That's Peter, in my mind.

"Don't say you're going to suffer; don't tell me that's what has to happen to the one you call Son of Man. We need things to stay just like they are now."

And in rebuking Peter for setting his mind not on divine things but on human things, the subtext of Jesus's message to Peter that day was: there will be a day when you have to let me go.

I was touched when, just the other day, Tom Izzo, the men's basketball coach at Michigan State, was asked about his predecessor and mentor, Jud Heathcote, who retired in 1990 and handed the reins to Izzo.

They said Izzo "kept looking up at the ceiling"^{viii} while he was talking about Heathcote, who died just a few months ago.

He said, "If we lost and it was a game we maybe should have won, he'd be on me about it."

But whenever there was something difficult in Izzo's life, the retired coach would write a long letter or make a phone call to his protégé. And Tom Izzo said, "That I do miss right now. The last two weeks I've been calling but nobody's answering."^{ix}

It's impossible not to feel for Elisha, all through that agonizing last journey where he kept refusing to let Elijah go on by himself—the deeply human desire to preserve the box around that relationship, to hold on as long as possible.

For Elisha, when he was around Elijah, it was always something mystical, something that illuminated, something life-defining for Elisha that led him to ask for no gift other than that he himself might inherit a double share of Elijah's spirit.

On this day when liturgical tradition has Churches throughout the world observing the Biblical event of the transfiguration and praying for our own,

three days from the day when liturgical tradition brings us into the most solemn and reflective time in the church year, starting with Ash Wednesday,

we have on our minds—many of us—the bracing reality of human life, and the gratitude that lives deep in the heart of every Christian for what Jesus invites us to be in this life by following him, and what he has done for us in eternal life, in opening the door for us all.

John O'Donohue writes to one who is gone:

May you continue to inspire us:

*To enter each day with a generous heart.
To serve the call of courage and love
Until we see your beautiful face again
In that land where there is no more separation,
Where all tears will be wiped from our mind,
And where we will never lose you again.^x*

God gives us people and times and places that resonate, where every once in a great while, just for us, as if up on a high mountain, apart, we are able to

experience something holy and beautiful and true.

May that holiness, truth and beauty illuminate our whole lives,
and may we learn to share it as freely, abundantly, kindly and mercifully
as it has been shared with us.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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ⁱ G.M. Sumner (Sting), “Spirits in the Material World” © 1981 Blue Turtle Music (ASCAP)

ⁱⁱ G.M. Sumner (Sting), “Invisible Sun” © 1981 Blue Turtle Music (ASCAP)

ⁱⁱⁱ G.M. Sumner (Sting), “One World (Not Three)” © 1981 Blue Turtle Music (ASCAP)

^{iv} G.M. Sumner (Sting), “Secret Journey” © 1981 Blue Turtle Music (ASCAP)

^v μεταμορφώθη (*metemorphōthē*) “he was transfigured”

^{vi} Matthew 17:4-5

^{vii} Luke 9:33

^{viii} Graham Couch, “Tom Izzo could use a call from Jud Heathcote right about now.” Lansing State Journal, Published 11:33 p.m. ET Feb. 8, 2018 | Updated 9:26 a.m. ET Feb. 9, 2018 (<https://www.freep.com/story/sports/columnists/graham-couch/2018/02/08/tom-izzo-jud-heathcote-michigan-state-basketball-couch-column/320948002/>)

^{ix} Couch, “Izzo could use a call,” LSJ.

^x John O’Donohue, “On the Death of the Beloved” in O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 170-71