

IS YOUR HEAD IN THE CLOUDS?

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Lindley G. DeGarmo¹

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
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2 Kings 2:1-12
Mark 9:2-9

What a treat it is to be back in this great old church! It has been nearly three years since Sarah, Ellie and I set off in our covered wagon to Baltimore. While we have enjoyed the more stately pace of frontier living and the opportunity to serve among the fine people of Towson Presbyterian Church, we miss our friends and the unique dynamism of New York. It is good to come home, and I am grateful to Jon Walton for the invitation to be here on this Heritage Sunday.

It is a measure of how the Holy Spirit is at work in this place that I am looking out on not only on old friends, but also on so many new faces. First Church continues to grow and evolve. When I joined First Church twenty years ago, every new member was given a copy of Dorothy Ganfield Fowler's history, *A City Church*.² Dorothy was a professor at Hunter College and an elder of First Church. Her book covers the first 260 years of this congregation, through 1976. If you haven't read it, it is well worth the effort. What Fowler makes clear is that the heritage of this church is a microcosm of American church history, and tightly interwoven with the larger story of New York City and America itself.

There is much to admire about those who were here before us, particularly a recurring scrappiness that often challenged the principalities and power of their time: the church of Francis Makemie testing freedom of religion during the Colonial era; the church of John Rodgers and Alexander McDougall—the “Church of the Patriots”—enduring occupation as a British army stable of its support for the American Revolution; the church of Charles Parkhurst leading the civic reform movement against Tammany Hall in the late 1800's; the church of Harry Emerson Fosdick defending liberal Protestantism against the Fundamentalists in the 1920's; the church of Jack Mellin and John Macnab joining the struggle for civil rights in the 1960's; the church of Barrie Shepherd and Jon Walton standing firm against policies of the larger church that exclude some on the basis of sexual orientation and welcoming all God's children into membership and full participation in the life of the church.

Awareness of a glorious heritage is worthwhile if it encourages us to greater faithfulness as we face the unique challenges of our time and place. Dorothy Fowler ends her book by observing that the future of a church—even one with as magnificent a past as First Church has had—is always uncertain. It is, after all, the nature of the beast. We are

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² Dorothy Ganfield Fowler, *A City Church: The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York 1716-1976* (New York: The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 1981).

not born knowing Jesus Christ by name. It takes one generation to teach the next, and the church is always, therefore, just a single generation away from extinction.

The good news, of course, is that we are not alone in promulgating our future. In fact, it is not *our* future—or *our* church for that matter. It is God’s. One of the things that distinguishes us from, say, the New York Historical Society is our conviction that where our heritage has been good and glorious, it is because God has been at work among us, through us, transforming us into more than we were or ever could be on our own, into the very body of Jesus Christ in the world. “For,” as the apostle Paul says, “we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord...For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”³

Consider this morning’s lessons. They are all about “glory divine—Easter glory—even before Lent has officially begun. With [fantastic, pyrotechnical] detail, we are swept up into billowy clouds to meet a Living God face to face. We are invited to experience blessings falling from heaven, dazzling robes that glow in the dark, fiery chariots blasting through whirlwinds, visions vibrating with voices. [They are wild stories—something right out of special effects or the latest video game. They test our sense of the plausible. And, in fact,] we are given a choice. We can sit back, aloof and detached, scorning this mythical detail with cool intelligence, or we can clamber up the mountain, jump into the whirlwind, and allow ourselves to meet God.

“The point of our scripture for today is not to decide if these stories are factual, but to decide if they are true. [Do you know what I mean? It’s like the storyteller] Michael White [says:] ‘All my stories are true—and some of them even happened!’ The truth of our scripture for today is that, contrary to the understanding of early Hebrew writers, you and I *can* see God face to face—and still live. In fact, [I think the point is] if we can dare to enter into mystery, we will live more fully than ever before.

“Again and again throughout biblical history, God appears in [numinous, other-worldly] moments, [in] clouds, [in] whirlwinds, [in] dreams and] visions, and blinding lights. Like a rainbow suddenly piercing a black and bloated sky, God again and again, invades human history with hope. Dry land emerges from watery chaos. The waters of the sea part. Bushes burst into burning beauty. Storms are stilled. The blind are healed. Tombs become birthing rooms. Corpses leap up like dancing Lords. Sinners are knocked off their feet and recreated through sizzling light. Now, if we overlay biblical history with a transparent film of chronological history, what we discover is a pattern. God’s mighty acts [tend to] happen at moments of social and political transition—in those cracks of time when societies metamorphosize into new communities, new ideologies, new values systems. [The] Bible is a holy telescope, inviting us to look at the world in a particular way, and then to acknowledge that God is Sovereign, that God is in charge, and that God has a passionate love affair with humanity. Yes, a ‘big picture’ look at the Bible tells us that the [pivotal] moments of scripture are those moments when God takes a deep breath and plunges back into the human mess, persevering with holy passion to mold our human spirits into divine likeness.

³ 2 Corinthians 4:5-6.

“Our [two biblical] stories today [fit together that way], reminding us that faithful living is daring living. [The Old Testament lesson] shows [the prophet] Elijah passing on the mantle of prophetic spirit to [his disciple] Elisha, entrusting all of sacred history to one fragile soul. [Elijah is a larger-than-life figure in the lore of Israel. He’s right up there with Moses in Israel’s memory; and he’s not just a relic of the dusty past, but a carrier of the Israel’s faith and life into the future. Yet in this light-drenched moment in the wilderness, the torch is passed to a new generation, from Elijah, so manifestly powerful with God’s Spirit, to his successor, Elisha, who as yet has none of the signs of power. Will God be with Elisha?]

The other story[, from the New Testament,] shows Jesus [taking ownership of] his divinity in supernatural glory[, on ‘a high mountain,’ in a unique moment of terror and joy for those who witnessed it. The disciples who are there—Peter, James and John—hear a heavenly voice saying, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.’ Listen to him. And what they are to hear, to understand, is that Jesus is both the Son of God, powerful agent of healing and subject of dazzling glory, and the Son of Man, who will be betrayed and persecuted and crucified. The glory of that mountaintop cannot be separated from the suffering that lies ahead in Jerusalem. Jesus will pass on the mantle of that costly discipleship to them and] to people like us—a bunch of awkward, anxious agnostics.

“[Susan Andrews, a pastor down my way in Maryland who was the moderator of our Presbyterian General Assembly in 2003, has written about how b]oth of these stories—the assumption of Elijah and the Transfiguration of Jesus—[take us away from the comfortable routines of our daily lives and out into] holy places, to wild places where things are out of control, where God can recreate, out of chaos, promises of hope and wholeness. [In the first story,] Elijah retraces holy history, leading Elisha away from civilization back across the Jordan, back into the wilderness, back to the place of spiritual formation where God’s people wandered before the promised land was found. [And] Jesus, at the pivotal moment in his life when he leaves his Galilee ministry behind, and turns his face toward the passion of Jerusalem, it is at this moment that he leads the disciples up to the mountaintop close to God, into God’s mystery and might. These stories ask us a question. Are we willing to go with Elijah and Jesus? Are we willing to go to unpredictable places, to leave behind our calendars and our control, our habits and our truths, to climb out of our boxes of predictability in order to encounter God in new ways? [That *is* our heritage—as First Church and as Christians. And w]ith Lent beckoning to us this Wednesday, this question becomes both timely and urgent.

“Elisha—much more than the disciples—teaches us today how to meet God in wild places. Elijah doesn’t think Elisha, his protégé, can handle it. So Elijah tries to get Elisha to leave him, to let him die alone. [‘Stay here,’ Elijah urges, “let me go one alone.’] But Elisha will have none of it. So passionate is Elisha about his life with Elijah that even pain and separation cannot deter him. [‘As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’] Elisha not only tolerates mystery and pain, he risks and yearns and plunges right into it. What he most wants is a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, a new twist on the traditional Hebrew practice of double inheritance for an older son. He wants to drink into his own soul that dangerous, creative, undomesticated power that Elijah has carried so magnificently, that spark of God that has filled Elijah’s very human living. By so doing, Elisha knows that he can keep Elijah and God living in his own soul.

“Elijah responds with the ultimate test: ‘Elisha, you have asked a hard thing, yet if you see me as I am taken from you, then it will be granted you.’ It is a hard thing to ‘see’ God at work—to push ourselves to look into death, into grief, into pain, into healing, into creativity, into fear, into mystery—to look and see and experience and feel that which we cannot control and we cannot understand. It is hard work to ask for a portion of spirit, but it is the only way that we can be transformed. It is the only way we can move beyond our own narrowness into the magnificence of abundant life.

“When have you been invited to ‘see’ God—to climb the mountain, to enter the whirlwind, to stick your head in the clouds? When have you been transfigured or changed by an intimate encounter with the holy? To take a risk beyond conventional limits, to give up control and to trust the holy? Was it at the death bed of a loved one, when deep ridges of living pain relaxed into the peaceful healing of death? Was it at the moment of birth, where out of thick clouds of blood a perfect body was born? Was it in the midst of meditative prayer, when the boundaries of your own mind and body melted into the oneness of universal spirit? Was it a musical moment when the passion of emotion pushed open the limits of your mind and uncovered the beat of God’s heart? Was it in the midst of physical intimacy, when you and the one you love became ‘bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh?’ Was it during a political demonstration when thousands of voices became one voice crying for justice? Was it in the midst of rage or depression when all of a sudden your battered soul was lifted by an angel—soothed by a spirit beyond your own imagining? Was it a moment of professional perfection—when inexplicably all your spiritual gifts came together, glorifying and enjoying God with energy intelligence, imagination, and love? My friends, these moments to ‘see’ God are offered to each one of us all the time. But, like Elisha, we have to want them. We have to need them. We have to seek them—even if it means wandering in wild places of disordered wonder.”⁴

What a great challenge that can be for modern people caught up in the fast-paced and cosmopolitan life of this great metropolis, so far removed from mountaintops and deserted places! Who is looking for that sort of thing? Who has time for it? I know I didn’t—wasn’t—when I first came to First Church on the invitation of college friend many years ago. My life was full then of the challenges of investment banking, the exhilaration of being young and on a fast track, on my own, in this big city. Oh, I could appreciate the aesthetic splendor of this sanctuary, the gorgeous singing of the choir, the intelligence and good humor of sermons, even the friendliness of the people. But nothing in the world have could induced me up to the mountaintop or out into the wilderness on that first Sunday. I had places to go, people to see.

Yet such was the hunger of my spirit—a hunger beyond conscious awareness—that it pushed me beyond what my mind could imagine. Not all at once, but gradually I discovered as I returned here week after week and month after month, that I was encountering more than a lovely place and good music and preaching and a friendly community. I began to catch a glimpse now and again, and then more often, of God’s love and power at work in my life and in the world around me. The more I ‘saw’ God with the eyes of my soul, the more ‘looking’ I wanted to do. And before I quite knew

⁴ Susan Andrews, “Is Your Head in the Clouds: A Sermon,” *Lectionary Homiletics* 27:2 (February-March 2006), 35ff.

what had happened, I was no longer who I had been—and yet somehow I was more myself, the self I wanted to be, than ever before.

I know I am not the only one. As your Interim Associate Pastor for more than three years, I was privileged to witness so many of you in this community of faith opening yourselves to the transforming power of God’s Spirit: listening to your souls, leaving business as usual and entering the wilderness, to climbing the mountain and to sticking your heads in the clouds. That *is* the heritage of this dear old church. And as Lent stretches before us, we are invited, once again to see God face to face and in each human face; to look beyond the wilderness and on the other side of the mountain for God’s promised land of healing and wholeness—for ourselves and for the world. “If we look, we will see. We will see, in the shadow of the cross, the glory of the coming of the Lord. So let us go to some wild and holy place. And may God have mercy upon our souls.”⁵

Let us pray:

Mysterious, wonderful, uncontainable God, come to us in all of your transforming glory, and transfigure our civilized world into your kingdom of heaven. Warm our hearts and mold our ways so that our very living may praise you. Amen.

⁵ Andrews, *Ibid.*