

ABOVE TREE LINE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

It's one thing to fly in a plane and look down on flyover country. No question you get a perspective you don't otherwise see from the ground looking up.

But breaking tree line when hiking is a more satisfying experience, *earning* the view with each new step, getting above the pines and scrubs that block your view of the broad landscape that inspired the trip in the first place. It's getting there to the unobstructed view that is the reward for the journey.

Hiking in the Presidentials one summer in New Hampshire, this Missouri boy got a view he had never seen before; the world laid out like a map before me, seeing several states and as far as the ocean, I thought...

No "*This car climbed Mt. Washington*" sticker for my car. *These feet* have taken me to the top of Mt. Washington and captured the view along the way.

I hadn't realized what a vista there is from way up above the ground. But once you see it, it changes your perspective. There is a sense that this is true bliss, real freedom, that the sky is no longer the limit, but sky and earth are one, and when you return to the plain below you are changed. You see the world differently because of what you have seen above.

Today we read two stories from scripture both involving a view from on high in which perspectives change, the story takes a dramatic turn, and for the ones who are lifted up and transformed by what they see, it becomes a key moment that changes their and our view of the one who has the whole world in his hands or perhaps who cradles the whole world in her arms.

The first account is the story of Elijah and Elisha, prophet and prophet-successor who have a remarkable experience as they journey from Gilead to Bethel to Jericho, and then upon Elisha's solo return... from Jericho to Bethel to Mt. Carmel and eventually to Samaria.

If there are familiar sounding echoes of previous times in Israel's history, it's meant to be that way. The writer of II Kings knows the story of Israel's history and sees the fingerprints of a God of covenant and renewal in the story of Elijah and his successor Elisha.

And, of course it's there at Jericho that the whirlwind comes, the one that takes up Elijah on that last journey into the heavens, but not before he has rolled up his mantle like Moses' rod and struck the River Jordan, parting the waters. A sign that Elisha will perform in the same way as his mentor Elijah has done when Elisha makes the return trip.

It is there at the Jordan after they have crossed together that that mighty wind we will see and feel again as the power and presence of God in the Bible, takes Elijah up into heaven and from there, Elisha is given exactly what he has asked, to follow Elijah, with a double portion of the spirit that rested upon the old prophet, and the mantle that has fallen upon his shoulders.

That's one story, the story of the passing of the mantle and the journey of God's people seeking one who will transfigure their experience of God. The story of the lifting up of Elijah, swept into heaven, well above tree line, by a fiery God who drives a flaming chariot.

David Lose, former President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia helps us deepen our understanding about the role of a prophet in Israel's life,

To be a prophet is not to be a solitary figure standing at a distance in order to predict the future or call upon the judgment of the Lord. Rather, to be a prophet is to enter deeply into the realities and

relationships of the people to whom you are sent... To be a prophet is to be completely vulnerable, absolutely dependent on God's word and mercy.¹

And this is the connection between the old testament passage and the gospel reading today. Lose, continues,

...the most striking link to Mark's narrative is found in this theme of vulnerability [and entering deeply into the realities and relationships of the people to whom you are sent....] The dependence of these two prophets [Elijah and Elisha] on the mercy of God is qualitatively similar to the vulnerability and dependence of Jesus, the beloved Son, who will come down the mountain only to be betrayed and made to suffer and die on the cross, a fate he anticipates and accepts only by his trusting completely in God's mercy.²

It's fascinating that at these two moments in scripture where a prophet and a savior are so extravagantly described as being transfigured (Elijah carried to heaven in a chariot of fire, and Jesus transformed in brilliant light before the very eyes of Peter, James, and John on that mountainside) they are changed before our eyes precisely at a moment when they are completely vulnerable and open to whatever God is about to do in their life. For Elijah it is the end of his days, the end of his prophetic authority, the conclusion of his service to God as the mantle falls from his shoulders to the shoulders of his successor Elisha.

And for Jesus, it is a precursor, a foreshadowing of what it will take for him to come into glory.

And what will it take? It will take utter surrender to the purposes of God which are to redeem us and to save us by overcoming the power of death through surrendering to the power of God's love.

I love Peter's plea, his pitiful attempt to keep the experience in some way in the story of the transfiguration on the mountainside. It's so like me. Like so many of us, in fact. Peter, upon whom Jesus' mantle will fall, ...Peter has a hard time finding something to say that makes good sense he is so enthralled by what has happened.

After all, they have just gotten a good look at Jesus and he has changed. Resplendent, glorious. Wearing a white robe that is brighter than any bleach on earth can whiten. And yes, of course we are meant to think about the white robes of Easter morning's angels.

Some scholars have suggested that this is Mark's breadcrumb trail, his foreshadowing that leads us back to the empty tomb, that in fact this is a resurrection story, a story that Mark has juxtaposed as he exerts a little authorial discretion and inserts a resurrection appearance at an earlier point in the life of Jesus because Mark wants us to know that that resurrection power of God is with us at all times and in all places. And Mark knows that time and location fade in service of that greater truth.

Or maybe this mountaintop transfiguration was a reflection of the awakening realization of the disciples who bit by bit grasped who it was with whom they had been on that mountainside, and with whom they had sailed on the sea in the storm, and with whom they had broken bread so many times at table. Memory brightens our understanding, sometimes, even as our sense of time blurs.

My friend Tom Long describes a moment when his daughter Melanie was a child and she was laughing and running around the dining room table, and Tom was running after her playing. And he stopped in his tracks because suddenly Melanie was no longer a child running around the dining room table, but a grown woman, laughing and playing and smiling a deeper vision of time in a time yet to be. Tom said it was like a moment out of context in which she was transfigured, changed in the twinkling of an eye as he realized that that moment, that instant would never come back again, and yet there it was. There she was transfigured in Kairos time, God's time.

Maybe the question we ought to be asking is not so much how did the transfiguration happen, or did it, but rather who was it that was transfigured?

Maybe it's Elisha that is transformed as much as it is Elijah. Maybe it's Peter and James and John who are overtaken by the power and presence of God and who shine like the sun brighter than any bleach on earth.

In both instances the power and presence of God is made known because along the way the eyes of Elisha and of Peter and James and John are opened to the holy. And when that happens they will be able to claim the power and authority to reflect God's glory. They will not do it by staying on the far side of the Jordan, nor by building booths to become the permanent resting place of holy presence, as if having found God there once, God could then be limited to the places where we have found God in the past.

This is the perfect pair of lessons for officers and people on a journey together, and especially on a day like today. We Presbyterians ordain and install elders and deacons, and commission trustees to guide the church on a journey in which God is leading them.

You as a congregation have identified and elected these officers who will be leaders in a critical time of transition and change that lies ahead. It is you, not the pastors, who will determine how you will respond to the call that God is placing before you, how you will shape the programs and ministries and direction of the church in the years ahead.

And you must not do so based on the fact that you have sensed God close in this way or that in the past. You must think, instead, about how God will lead you in the ways that you have not yet travelled, and not necessarily in ways that will recreate the past, as if yesterday was God's only glory day, or First Presbyterian Church's.

God has so much more in store, for you and for me and for the church. So many new and other ways to be present among us yet to be revealed. We must not try to limit God to the booths we make or the chapels we build to the past. But rather be open to the ways in which God will come in new ways, opening new doors, revealing God's presence in what we have not yet seen.

I have been thinking about the names of the pastors that have been carved into the chairs that are in the chancel. I don't know whether you have ever paid any attention, but the three pastors' chairs that are in the chancel bear medallions just above our heads that are a representation of the three congregations that are the tributaries that flowed together at a critical time in the past – University Place Presbyterian Church, Madison Square Presbyterian Church, and Old First of 1716.

Over on the far left are the names of the pastors of this church, the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, and mine is the last name there with my beginning date of 2001 which was carved as I arrived 16 and a half years ago. And now we know what the second number will be, 2018. Each pastor's years of ministry mark an era in the life of the church, and that is one way of marking the church's journey.

But in a sense, the pastors are only a part of the larger story, and maybe we should have never gotten into the habit of carving the pastor's names, but rather carving the names of the elders, the deacons, the trustees, the members. Because by our Presbyterian way of thinking, you are the church, we are the church, we are the church together. And all the members are ministers serving Christ by serving one another.

The real transfigurations that we know and experience sometimes happen in some holy place, but most often happen in the common places where God chooses to appear, which can be anywhere, across the Jordan, on a mountainside, in the church, hiking in the woods, at the beach. It is usually a surprise where that will be and no telling whose eyes will be transfigured when the light of God's presence shines.

One thing I know, and that is that you cannot make a place holy and build booths to remember how you felt, as if you could keep a bit of God's moment in a jar, as if the hands of eternity were not still moving forward.

God will shine where God will shine, and wise is the one who sees and gives thanks and continues on the journey seeing things differently because of that light.

Faith is a matter of getting above tree line, glimpsing the glory that is there, catching a view of the larger landscape, knowing that God is present when we open our eyes and see what is truly before us and know it as if for the first time.

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¹ David Lose, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 437

² *Ibid.*