



SERMONS THAT WORK

The Last Sunday after Epiphany Year B

Behind the Veil

[RCL] 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Come, Holy Spirit, let us go up to the mountain. Open our ears to hear God's voice in the clouds. Open our eyes to see God's glory shine through the veil. Open our hearts to trust that God is always with us on the journey, so that when we come down from the mountain, we will not be afraid. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany, Transfiguration Sunday. The readings from Second Kings and the Gospel of Mark are just dazzling, two of the most beautiful stories in scripture: Elijah's ascent to heaven and Jesus' transfiguration. These are mystical, magical stories where heaven and earth meet in an extraordinary human being. These are stories of miracles and the eternal; at the same time, these stories are profoundly human, speaking of love, loss, grief, and transformation.

The Transfiguration describes a theophany, an experience of God's ever-near eternal presence. Mark tells the story with a clear simplicity. Jesus goes to a mountain to pray, accompanied by his dear friends, the disciples Peter, James, and John. And there they see him transfigured, dazzling white, shining with the glory of God, and talking with the great prophets Moses and Elijah. The scene is reminiscent of Moses' transfiguration in Exodus 34, when he came down from Mt. Sinai with the tablets of the covenant, his face shining so brightly from his encounter with God that his people were afraid and he had to cover it with a veil. In each story, the mountain is a thin place, a bridge between heaven and earth.

The Transfiguration describes a mystical moment on the mountain, a visible manifestation of the union of human and divine in Jesus. Like Moses' people, Jesus' friends are terrified by what they have seen. Terrified—and in awe of that glimpse of God's eternal glory, and Jesus' unity with that Glory, and indeed the unity of all humankind forever and ever, world without end, in God and Jesus.

In the climax of the scene, Jesus is called by God, who confirms his identity as the Son of God. "This is my Son the Beloved; listen to him!" This experience is a turning point for Jesus as well as his disciples. Jesus, reminded of his unity with God, turns toward the inevitable end of his human story. The Transfiguration is a bridge between Jesus' public ministry as a traveling teacher and healer in Galilee, and the road to his passion, death, and resurrection in Jerusalem. Transfiguration Sunday is a bridge from Epiphany, when we celebrate the miracles and works of Jesus' life, to Lent, when we focus on Jesus' journey to the cross.

The Transfiguration is a miracle, a revelation of Christ's glory, a glimpse behind the veil between heaven and earth, a hint of the end-time. Miracles need to be experienced. Perhaps this is a clue to Jesus'

instruction to his friends to tell no one what they had seen. Miracles, like an experience of God, cannot be adequately described or explained.

The story of Elijah's ascent to heaven is another such meeting of heaven and earth, an experience of God that is dazzling and miraculous. We know from the opening line of the passage that God is about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elijah knows where he is going; the company of prophets know where he is going; his student and protégé Elisha knows where he is going. In an echo of Jesus' instruction to *tell no one*, Elisha insists: *keep silent*. He knows, but he is not ready. It is touching and profoundly human that Elisha will not leave his master. He stays with him as long as he can, accompanying him on the journey to eternal union with God. Elisha tries to hold on to all that his friend is to him: human mentor, divinely-inspired prophet and healer, holy man who is intimately connected with God. "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit," he begs in his distress.

Embedded within these stories of transfiguration—these revelations of God's glory—are stories of human grief. Elisha accompanies his beloved mentor as far as he can, until he can no longer see him, then tears his clothes in lamentation. Peter, James, and John too are reluctant to let go of the marvelous, concrete, human manifestation of God's eternal light. They suggest that they might make dwellings for the prophets, keep them here with them. They do not want their beloved to leave them behind.

Today we've heard two stories of thresholds, moments of crossing over, journeying toward the threshold of life and death, the temporal and eternal, with a loved teacher. How like a scene from hospice care! Family and friends are gathered to hold vigil at the threshold of life and death, to accompany their loved one as far along the journey as they can. There may be a glimpse of the shining light toward which the traveler has already turned his or her face. "Please stay, I'll build you a house," you might plead. Or, simply, since you must go, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

Both stories are encounters with the divine, encounters at the threshold. They are reminders that God walks with us on our journey to unity with the infinite, mystical, unknowable, and untellable. In the intimacy and heightened intensity of a bedside death vigil, as at the transfiguration or the ascent to heaven, may we be open to the moments when we can catch a glimpse, a fleeting experience, of God's eternal glory. Feeling God's presence in the transfigured faces at a hospice bedside, or as sunlight pours through the stained glass of a chapel window, transfiguring the face of Christ, the miracle and blessing of grief is the spiritual deepening that can result. May we live in hope and die in the certainty of unity with God and all the saints. In the stories of Jesus' transfiguration and Elijah's ascent to heaven, the dead are not lost nor the living left behind. Grief and suffering are transformed by the mystical knowledge that we shall be together in God's love again, as we always have been and always shall be.

The closing words are from the collect of the day. Let us pray: O God, grant that we, beholding by faith the light of Christ's countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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