

Transfiguration of Our Lord, Year B

February 19, 2012

2 Kings 2: 1-12, Psalm 50: 1-6, 2 Corinthians 4: 3-6, Mark 9: 2-9

### **2 Kings 2:1-12**

*{1}* Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. *{2}* Elijah 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. *{3}* The 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." *{4}* Elijah 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. *{5}* The 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." *{6}* Then 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. *{7}* Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. *{8}* Then 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. *{9}* When 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." *{10}* He 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." *{11}* As 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. *{12}* Elisha 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.

### **Psalm 50:1-6**

*{1}* The mighty one, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. *{2}* Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. *{3}* Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him. *{4}* He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: *{5}* "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" *{6}* The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. Selah

### **2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

*{3}* And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. *{4}* In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. *{5}* For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. *{6}* 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.

### **Mark 9:2-9**

*{2}* Six 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, *{3}* and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. *{4}* And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. *{5}* Then 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." *{6}* He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. *{7}* Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" *{8}* Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. *{9}* As 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.

First, a few words about why we hear this strange story each year on this day. As you know, our Sunday readings follow a three year cycle and each year we hear about the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus from either the Gospel of St. Matthew, St. Mark, or St. Luke. There's also some of St. John's Gospel thrown in from time

to time. This year we hear from St. Mark. Advent begins the new Church year and during the later part of the season we start to focus on the birth of Jesus. During Epiphany and the “Sundays after Epiphany”, we hear about the beginnings of Jesus’ teaching and ministry. So, each year we “follow along” with Jesus.

The second readings are generally chosen from one of the letters of St. Paul, parts of which are pretty much read in succession each Sunday. The first reading from the Old Testament as well as the Psalm usually reflect the Gospel story for a given Sunday.

The story of the Transfiguration appears at a critical point in the Gospels of Sts. Matthew, Mark and Luke, marking the transition when Jesus began His final journey to Jerusalem. As you know, this week is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent when we focus more intentionally and intently on that journey. So, it makes “sense” “chronologically” to be listening to the story of the Transfiguration today.

As you know, I like to look through a variety of Bible commentaries and online resources when preparing for the sermon. There are always many opinions on what particular verses or stories mean, sometimes determined by the time period when the commentaries were written and/or by denominational affiliation. Once in a while there is a broad general consensus, though with minor differences of opinion. When it comes to today’s story about the Transfiguration, differences abound. There are as many opinions and theories as there are scholars, pastors, and preachers. The only certainty is that since the story appears in three out of four Gospels, it was obviously important, even if no one knows exactly why.

Not having all the clear and correct answers is not really such a bad thing, especially when it comes to God and Jesus. A little bit, or a lot, of lack of clarity can, hopefully, keep us humble and even charitable with those who may think or believe differently. I love the fact that it’s just not very easy to “pin” Jesus down. A little mystery isn’t necessarily negative. This keeps us from making Jesus into our image, which is a natural tendency. (There’s a famous Irish theologian whose rather liberal views about Jesus are said to make Jesus look very much like an Irish freedom fighter.)

Here’s where I go out on a bit of a limb.

When the people of Israel wandered through the desert and even after they settled, the place of God’s dwelling was a very portable, even if very elaborate, tent. Sometimes it seems to have been pitched in the middle of the camp

and, when God made them a bit nervous, at the edges. The way the people knew God was home was the presence of a cloud, light, a voice, etc. As the story goes, once King David had built a fine palace for himself, he basically said, “Now it’s your turn, God.” God initially refused, citing among other things, the freedom to “move about”. Well, the Temple was built by David’s son, Solomon (with forced labor, by the way), and within a short period of time it became a “mixed blessing” and a way to “confine” God for some of people. Both the Old and New Testaments give witness to a sort of “love-hate” relationship to the Temple.

Maybe, just maybe, this story of the Transfiguration is God’s way of reasserting God’s freedom to move around and to dwell among the people. The place where God’s glory now chooses to dwell is *this* Jesus of Nazareth, in this flesh and blood. The church (that would be us), especially after the Ascension and Pentecost, is also known as the “body of Christ”, and so that makes *us* God’s dwelling place as well.

That’s really good news for me because as a church professional I am constantly listening to and being very discouraged by stories about the demise and death of “mainline” Protestant Christianity and congregational life as we know it. I’m encouraged because even a denomination or congregation can never confine God, and as long as folks like us gather, no matter where it is or what it looks like, God is “on the move”.

Here’s an interesting bit of information I came across. In three of the Gospels, if someone had something stupid to say, chances are it would have been Peter. So, that whole “let’s build three booths” bit is thought to be a prime proof and example of just that.

Perhaps Peter wasn’t as dumb as we like to think.

The feast of Booths, or *Sukkot*, was one of the great Jewish pilgrimage festivals commemorating God’s provision for the people as they wandered through the desert. It was also a harvest festival. I grew up right next to a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, so each year on that feast there would be hundreds, if not thousands, of booths set up on porches, balconies, yards, etc. In fact, many very observant people had their small NYC style apartments modified to include just such a porch. Way back in the day, people were supposed to live in them, but being New York City and all; they just needed to eat the evening meal there. In parts of the Judaism at the time of Jesus, there was apparently a belief, based on some verses from the book of *Zechariah*, that God would come and rescue the

people and restore Israel during the feast of Booths. God would kick some butt. Maybe that's exactly what Peter thought and hoped was happening on that mountaintop.

The Gospel story began with "six days later". "Six days after what?" you may ask. Well, six days after Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, Jesus' first "passion prediction" about going to Jerusalem to face rejection and death, and Peter's refusal to accept such a prediction. Seeing Jesus in glory, along with Moses the liberator and Elijah the forerunner of the "end days", Peter might have thought *he* was right after all in rejecting all that silly talk back there about rejection, suffering, and death. Peter might have been looking for a different God, a different Jesus, a different way, a different life, a different kind of world, a "quick fix" (at any cost). Don't we all?

The voice from heaven, however, pointed right back to Jesus: "Listen to *him*." Strange as it might seem, that "otherworldly" vision directs us to *this* world. The way of God, the way of Jesus, in *this* world, is the way of vulnerable and non-manipulative love, of mercy, of grace, of forgiveness, and of inclusion, no matter the cost. God is faithful, wherever our journeys might be leading, even and especially when God seems most absent. While we tend to look for deliverance, God promises accompaniment.

Finally, St. Paul has what I believe to be the absolutely best understanding of the Transfiguration I've come across (even if he didn't know that's what he was providing at the time). Rather than spending a whole lot of time wondering about what really happened to Jesus on that day, the real question is "What is happening to us on any given day?"

What St. Paul said is just a few verses before what we heard in today's second reading. Notice that there is nothing conditional about it. He doesn't say "if", or "maybe", or "if you do this, God will do that". Listen:

*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3: 18)*

That it is so, by God's grace, thanks be to God.

AMEN.