

2 Kings 2: 1-12  
2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:2  
Mark 9: 2-9

A Vision, a Mountaintop, and a Mantle  
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Happy Quinquagesima Sunday! Before you all reach for your smart phones to google what Quinquagesima means (first you have to spell it!) I'll just tell you: it is the Sunday before the beginning of Lent, and the name comes from the Latin word for 'fifty.' In other words, it's 50 days until Easter. Another fun fact, in case you were feeling badly about not knowing that, Quinquagesima is in the lower 50% of commonly used words in the Collins dictionary, according to its online version.

Of course, today is more commonly called Transfiguration Sunday, because the Gospel reading set for this day tells the mysterious story of Transfiguration. Now, today, across the country, you could hear a lot of preachers go into detail about what **that** word means. I've done it myself: tried to guide people into making sense of why (or if) the Transfiguration happened, or why it fits where it does in the Gospel narrative, or why Matthew, Mark and Luke describe it...but not John, or what the early church made of it, or why were Moses and Elijah there, or whether we approve of Peter's reaction or not, etc, etc.

But wait a minute. When has this story ever "made sense?" When we set our problem-solving left brains to work on this we are missing the point. It's like spending all of October figuring out the science of fall color and ignoring the actual breathtaking hillsides and valleys. We should be gazing in awe, we should be drawn back, again and again, to this glowing figure, like moths to a flame, like an infant to her mother's face, like wordless worshippers in the presence of the holy. Instead, we protect ourselves from awe with words like transfiguration and Quinquagesima. Instead we analyze our epiphanies.

Like views of natural beauty, spiritual experiences, epiphanies of the divine, are moving targets. It is hard, if not impossible, to describe or measure the presence of the Holy Spirit because it **is** a moving target. It's here, it seems to be gone. But it happened, we know it happened, so we try to put in words what it means, and what was the impact. Some write sermons, some write books of theology. But Scripture gives us something else: stories, narratives that help us glimpse something, if only for a moment. Then we go on, living in the residual glow of that peak moment. The question is, not how Elijah or Jesus were transfigured, but how **we** may be transfigured, changed into another form, or as pastor Aaron Edwards put it, changed so we "match the outside with the reality of the inside."

The two stories we are given today are about those peak moments, and living after those moments. They are about inheritance and legacy: the passage of vision and leadership and power from one person to another, from one generation to another.

Lest we think that that visions were granted only long ago and far away, I want to find some modern stories, even though real life seems so complex and messy, so unlike the mythic splendor of

our spiritual traditions. Where do we catch a glimpse of glory, an illumination of the sort received by Elisha and Peter?

In our time and culture, it is so easy to dismiss even the longing for such a thing, and we deny our spiritual yearnings by filling our days with things and activities and projects. So many of our friends and neighbors do not seem to share a vocabulary of spirit. Christian Wiman, a poet who teaches at Yale, has written book, My Bright Abyss, a sort of poetic spiritual memoir. In it, he writes, “When I hear people say they have no religious impulse whatsoever ... I always want to respond: Really? You have never felt overwhelmed by, and in some way inadequate to, an experience in your life, have never felt something in yourself staking a claim beyond yourself, some wordless mystery straining through word to reach you? Never?” So writes Christian Wiman, in disbelief at the denial of spirit, and disbelief at the denial of the possibility of transfiguring experience that’s so prevalent in our time.

One caution here: I cannot say that the stories about visions and mountaintops and mantles are happy stories. They are dramatic and full of light, but they are also full of confusion and loss. Each story is about a turning point or threshold. Just as the beautiful fall colors don’t last, just as they tell us of the coming of winter, these moments of awe marks a boundary of ends and beginnings. And guess what: most of us don’t feel comfortable about leaping over boundaries: we’re a bit ambivalent, because change brings nostalgia and uncertainty. Why do things have to change, why do I have to change, can I avoid this? Does Elijah have to leave? Does Jesus have to travel to Jerusalem? The answer, for good or ill, is yes. This threshold needs to be crossed if our faith is to have any dynamism at all. Staying put means giving up on the promise.

When I look for a modern illustration of an epiphany, a vision, a choice or a threshold: some thing that illustrates an inspiration giving power to the future, I think of a couple of stories. One is this: 25 years ago, a man from South Africa – active in the anti-Apartheid struggle – decided that Christian discipleship as a white person in Apartheid South Africa meant moving into a Black township, to share in the inconveniences, deprivations and sufferings of the people. He and his wife did so. After two years, they both had complete breakdowns and had to move back into the white suburbs. The task of discipleship was simply too overwhelming. By contrast, a group of several white families from a church moved into a township for the same reasons – together. As a little community, they gradually became part of the wider community they believed God had called them to stand with – and their support for one another kept them sane and encouraged. This story tells me that we do not necessarily receive that mantle of power as individuals, as star prophets like Elisha. The mantle of prophetic power can and should fall on a community.

The second story is about transfiguration in that sense of metamorphosis: “matching the outside with the reality of the inside.” A girl is born into a loving family, that knows how to encourage her in every way. But as she reaches her teen years, the truth becomes clear: this person’s identity, the truest self, is not female. And there is a call from within to be the person he is meant to be. The threshold is crossed in the context of a loving family, a loving community, a loving church. No one needs to walk alone. God’s unfathomable mercy, grace, and glory is shared with our trans brothers, sisters, and children. What a blessing to participate in that transfiguration.

Bright visions, in Bible stories and in spiritual memoirs and in everyday life, are not easy to bear. That is because they demand something of us. Elisha did not just get a new outer garment when he said goodbye to Elijah and stood on the banks of the Jordan. He received a heavy mantle

of responsibility, a double measure of the Spirit, one that called him to account for the rest of his life. How would he translate the gift of that mantle into action? Peter and James and John did not just get a psychedelic dream, up there on the mountain, fuel for storytelling and reminiscence in later years. They received the weight of a mystery, something they had to spend the rest of their lives living into: “What does it mean for the Son of Man to rise from the dead?” How would they translate the vision into action, and thus “be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another,” as St Paul would say. Because we are all in the business of transfiguration, changing the forms and systems and habits, within us and within our communities, forms that are broken and violent and unjust and self-centered, into something brighter and newer and more conformed to divine glory. Listen to the stories around you, the stories of your ancestors, the stories of the Son of Man, the stories of your neighbors. And affirm, again, with Paul, “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”

I am, of course, preaching on the Sunday of our congregation’s annual meeting. Because we are good workers and good problem solvers, we will have food to eat, a place to sit, an agenda, and rules of order – all of which are habits, necessities, and part of the joyful fellowship we find here. Believe it or not, I actually like Annual Meeting...how wacky is that? Call me crazy, but....

There may be no flashy dreams or visions at the meeting. But here is a thought I’d like you to bring with you, as you attend that meeting or live into community with us following the meeting: let’s not think too small. Let’s not think in terms of weakness or scarcity. Let’s not choose the easiest path. We are heirs to visions and mountaintop experiences that are full of promise, full of abundance in the Spirit. Following those visions will involve crossing some thresholds, experiencing endings and beginnings. The future will look different, I guarantee it. But we have this potential, that I have seen most clearly when we gather and support one another – there is power here to be spent in the cause of light and goodness. I have seen this power when we gather to comfort each other in loss. I have seen it when we rejoice together in celebration. This power is rooted in God’s mercy, and “since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”

Later in this service, you will have the pleasure of hearing some of us sing a traditional spiritual about longing and promise. The words are simple: There is more love, somewhere. I’m gonna keep on til I find it. There is more joy, somewhere. I’m gonna keep on til I find it. There is more peace somewhere. I’m gonna keep on til I find it. There is more hope somewhere. I’m gonna keep on til I find it.

It’s 3 days before Ash Wednesday and 50 days before Easter. May we all be transfigured and transformed, as individuals and as a community. May we all see a vision, climb a mountain, accept the mantle. May the double measure of the Spirit be ours. Amen.