

2 Kings 2: 1-14
2 Corinthians 3: 17-18
Mark 9: 2-10

A Double Measure of the Spirit
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The Bible is full of little stories, little parables, little mysterious folk tales, little snippets of lives long past, little mythic visions. These may excite our imaginations and inspire a lot of religious art and song, whether or not we truly “understand” what we have read and heard. In the middle of the middle of the 1800s, an African-American slave in the Choctaw nation, named Wallis Willis wrote *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. A beautiful song: I used to sing it as a lullaby to my children. It is said that he was inspired by the Red River in Oklahoma, where he lived – in his imagination it became the Jordan River, the scene of Elijah’s fiery chariot ride. It is also said that the lyrics of this song, and another written by Willis, “*Steal Away*,” referred to the Underground Railroad, the trail of hope and freedom. I am sure that you have all heard heart-stirring versions of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

Real life is so much more complex and messy than a simple song, or the simple, 14-verse story we find in *First Kings*, isn’t it? Willis was an African-American slave of a Native American tribe, which itself had been displaced from its homeland by the US Government. His singing is overheard by a Presbyterian minister, who sends the song to the Jubilee Singers in 1871, who then perform it throughout the United States and Europe. Then, about 30 years ago, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* became the anthem of the English National Rugby Team, and thousands of excited, inebriated fans bellow it out in the stadium before a game. Who could have envisioned that a story told by the ancient Hebrews almost 3000 years ago would end up this way? And is it possible to remove the layers of history from any story to find out what really happened, and what it means, now?

We might start by trying to find an analog, a comparable experience to Elisha’s riverside vision, or the disciples mountaintop vision. Maybe you or I have had a blinding moment of clarity, a genuine “spiritual experience” that could be described in story form. It may be that such a moment was so private or so unformed that you have never been able to describe it and are reluctant to share it. Maybe for you it comes out in art or song. The truth is often stranger than fiction, and our lives are full of events that are impossible to explain, yet are essential to who and whose we are. We do not so much define these events, as we ourselves are defined by them. And so these biblical stories, so strange, so like fairy tales or fables, are essential definitions of who Elisha was, and who Peter was, and what it means to be a human being searching for divine presence. The chariot ride into heaven and the transfiguration of Jesus are not explainable, and that is not their purpose. They tell us something about the larger narrative of human life.

Lest we think that that visions were granted only long ago and far away, I want to tell some modern stories, when 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 is a

poet who teaches at Yale. I am reading his 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 as the denial of spirit so prevalent in our time.

Wiman has had his own share of blindness to glory – the kind of glory that masquerades as everyday life. He tells this story on himself: “One day when I had gone to a little chapel near my office at lunchtime, and was once more praying while wondering how and why and to whom I prayed, a man came in and eased into the pew directly across the aisle from me. As we were the only two people there, his choice of where to sit seemed odd, and irritating. Within a couple of minutes, all thought of God was gone into the man’s constant movements and his elaborate sighs, and when I finally rose in exasperation, he stood immediately to face me. He had the sandblasted look of long poverty, the skeletal clarity of long addiction, and that vaguely aggressive debasement that truly tests the nature of one’s charity. Very cunning, I noted, failing the test even as I opened my wallet: to stake out this little chapel, to prey upon the praying! For days it nagged at me – not him, but it, the situation – which I finally realized, was precisely the problem: how easily a fatal complacency seeps into even those acts we undertake as disciplines, and how comfortable we become with our own intellectual and spiritual discomfort. *Wondering how and why and to whom I prayed?* I felt almost as if God had been telling me, as if Christ were telling me (in the church no less) get off your mystified ass and *do* something.” A vision, an insight, an apparition, a transfiguration of memory had been granted to Christian Wiman.

I read the news, and in the tragedy and heartbreak I catch glimpses of an illuminating brightness. I am reminded that Elisha’s story was one of loss and sadness. He followed his teacher, Elijah, even though he knew that an end was coming. He stayed until that last moment. Yes, he saw a fiery vision, but he still tore his clothes in grief. The mantle was his, the double measure of the Spirit was his, but the loss was real. I have been reading some of the words written by Kayla Mueller, the aid worker whose death was confirmed earlier this week, after 18 months of captivity. Four years ago, when she was 22, Ms. Mueller wrote this in a letter to her father: “I find God in the suffering eyes reflected in mine. Some people find God in church. Some people find God in nature. Some people find God in love; I find God in suffering. I’ve known for some time what my life’s work is, using my hands as tools to relieve suffering.” And then, in a more recent letter written while in captivity, “I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator because literally there was no else... by God and by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall. I have been shown in darkness, light, and have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful. I have come to see that there is good in every situation, sometimes we just have to look for it.” Even as we mourn the passing of a tender soul like Kayla Mueller, we might well ask for a double measure of her spirit.

I read the news, and in the tragedy of a shooting in North Carolina I catch glimpses of illuminating brightness. I remember the puzzled disciples, walking down the mountain, listening to Jesus tell them to keep the experience to themselves, and then “questioning among themselves what this rising from the dead might mean.” A few days ago three young people, aged 23, 21 and 19 were shot in their home by a neighbor. They were hard-working young Muslim-Americans, committed in their to service to their local community and to the world. The oldest, Deah Shaddy Barakat, was a dental student who had worked with a charity providing emergency dental care to children in

Palestine and was planning to do the same for Syrian refugees this summer. His wife, Yusor Abu-Salha (they were married less than 2 months ago) volunteered with Project: Refugee Smiles, a program through which she traveled to Turkey and helped provide dental care to people in need. Her voice was heard on NPR's StoryCorps last May: "Growing up in America has been such a blessing, and you know, although in some ways I do stand out, such as the hijab I wear on my head, the head covering," Abu-Salha said, "there's still so many ways that I feel so embedded in the fabric that is, you know, our culture. And that's the beautiful thing here, is that it doesn't matter where you come from. There's so many different people from so many different places of different backgrounds and religions, but here we're all one, one culture." All three of these young people regularly served food to the homeless in Raleigh, North Carolina. Suzanne Barakat, the sister of the young man, said "They all had so much to offer, and I just want to make sure that we continue that legacy for them...and that all of us Americans, collectively, do not let their deaths go in vain." Sameer Abdel-Khalek, a family friend of Barakat said that he felt "inspired" by the reaction and solidarity both of the Muslim community, and of the wider community. "At the end of the day," he said, "it shows the light that persists even in darkness. You can only gauge the darkness by the light; and this light has overtaken the darkness that has befallen us." The mourning, the grief, the legacy, the brightness of a vision - we might well ask for a double measure of their spirit. And the eternal pondering..."what might rising from the dead mean after the senseless loss of life?"

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, 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. 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. See the vision behind the homeless panhandler and the Islamic headscarf. Listen and see, and write your own song of hope and triumph.