

Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 11, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. 2 Kings 2:1-12, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9

I've always loved the story of Elijah's departing, and the passing of prophetic mantle. This is not an "ending" story, but one about transition and transformation. A prophet might pass, riding off into the sunset, as it were, in a thunder of hooves and chariots, but the prophetic office continues; the power of the prophet is firmly in place in the life of Elisha. We often miss that – we focus on Elijah when the story's really about the Prophetic Voice that Elijah carried. That Prophetic Voice, the author says, doesn't end with the death or even ascension of one particular figure, but it is available for all who choose to carry on that tradition.

The author of this text wants us to notice something else, too: how much Elijah and Elisha are like Moses and Joshua. When the waters are parted by Elijah, everyone would have instantly thought of Moses, parting the waters of the Reed Sea. And just as Moses died before entering the Promised Land, with his work incomplete, so too is Elijah taken up from the other side of the Jordan – outside the Promised Land – with his anointed successor Elisha – just like Joshua – crossing over into the land of Promise.

The storyteller wants his readers to see that parallel, and wonder, *in their own time*, what it means to enter a place of promise, what's coming into being, what momentous transition is about to happen or is actually already happening in their lives.

Later, 1st Century readers will be invited by Mark in today's gospel passage to see in someone else a similar connection with both Moses and Elijah, to recognize another example of the prophetic voice in action, and be wonder for themselves *in their own time*, what sort of land they're being invited to enter into, what's coming into being, what momentous transition is about to happen or is actually already happening in their lives.

And that's one of Mark's invitations that's leveled directly at us, too.

In our own time, In some sense, every community of faith stands on the edge of the river, looking over to a place of promise that lies on the other side. How do we cross over? For Elisha, what allowed him to cross over was the experience of looking into the whirlwind. It changed him. Only then was he able to cross back over. Are we willing to look into that metaphorical "whirlwind" that has to do with being open to an encounter with the Divine? And are we willing to allow ourselves to be changed – transformed – by God? We're being invited into some sort of metaphorical "land" – we're always being invited to that place of encounter where we're always being invited to the place of God's transforming grace, that's always ready to happen in our lives – if we let it happen. Without an openness to that grace it will be very hard to see what is coming into being, to see what momentous transition is about to happen or is actually already happening in our lives.

So that's the invitation from the Old Testament reading today: to ask ourselves about our willingness to look into the whirlwind of God and decide if we're willing to pick up the mantle that's symbolic of the transforming grace of God and allow it to change us.

The mountaintop of Transfiguration is – for Peter and James, and John, a lot like looking into the whirlwind – though this time, it's a cloud that stands for this place and moment of encounter with God. Yes, now we're up a mountain – a "thin place," a place translucent to the divine.

Peter immediately gets all I've just said about Moses-Joshua, and Elijah-Elisha. For him it's another "parting-the-water/freedom-from-slavery/entering-a-place-of-promise" moment. This is a moment of glory, a moment of encounter with God. Let's build the "booths that commemorate the Exodus story, a booth that's a symbolic "home" for God to dwell. We should rightly rejoice at his insight. The problem is that he's seeing a literal link to the Old Testament stories, and especially the Exodus story – after all, "Jesus" is, in Aramaic, "Jeshua," which, in Hebrew, is "Joshua...!"

It's not hard to see that Peter's likely assuming that it will all happen the same way, marching into the promised land - that all will fall in the face of the mighty Israelites, and their mighty God, Yahweh! This time it will be the Romans who will – Peter thinks! – melt before them! "God's reign is a done deal", he's thinking, "God's glory has broken through for good. God will now pitch God's tent on earth....".

Peter's mind is on glory – the glory of entering the Promised Land, the glory of encountering God in the whirlwind and, now, in the cloud. There's absolutely no room for suffering and loss in that daydream, only triumph. It has to be booths raised, not a cross.

So when they come off this "mountaintop experience" Peter's blind-sided when Jesus silences him; he's utterly shocked! How could it be that things that seemed so clear now suddenly aren't fitting together the way he expected?

Don't we do the same thing Peter did?! We all want to stay on the mountaintop – it's so wonderful to get bound up in the glorious, exuberant, mystically joyful moments of our lives, to the exclusion of everything else – they don't happen that often, after all. Who wants to go back to everyday life, with its conflict and challenge? For example, how could falling in love involve doing the dishes, or being responsible with family finances, or cleaning the bathroom?!!

We want to experience God without all the complications that come with that experience, like living an authentic life where we're called to be devoted to the hard work of relationships with each other; and of struggling for the things we value, like equality, justice, fairness.

If we are to live a full life, then the pathway always leads us off the mountaintop, with the promise that we can – in fact, must – return from time to time; always leads us from contemplation to action, from mysticism to the grimy hands required to help bring heaven to earth. That Prophetic Voice doesn't end with the death or even ascension of one particular figure, it's passed on to all faithful people.

In the movie Casablanca, Humphrey Bogart's character Rick sends off the love of his life, Elsa, with one of the great lines in movie history: "We'll always have Paris." We'll always have accessible to us – if we choose to seek it – the Mountaintop, those mystical moments of encounter when the divine meaning shines through the world of atoms, particles, rocks, and sunsets. The energy of God – the energy of love – permeates all things. Today we're invited to affirm that faith and prayer can shape our lives for the best. For sure, as an old Turkish proverb says, "the mountain can't come to Mohammed". But we can take the mountaintop experience and mediate it to a world very much in need of moments of transcendent beauty, and meaning, and love, moments of transformation for all that is good, and right, and holy.

To be able to do that, we must make the journey that will begin this Wednesday and end in light and joy.