

Sermon (2/11/18, 2 Kings 2: 1-14):

This is the last Sunday in Epiphany. This coming Wednesday begins the season of Lent. As is customary in our Christian Calendar, we end the season of Epiphany by remembering the transfiguration—that moment when Jesus, Peter, James, and John climbed up a mountain to witness a kind of unearthly, divine Glory that, well, was transformative.

It does fit well with the theme of Epiphany, which is a season when we explore and reflect on epiphanies or encounters which reveal the divine such as what the Magi experienced when visiting the young Jesus and his family. Epiphanies or encounters with the holy like this have a profound way of leaving us in a different place than we once were. It's a kind of glory that shakes the very foundation upon which we walk, opening us to a new kind of unavoidable reality.

The interesting thing about such transformations or transfigurations is that they almost always come with a mixture of terror and excitement. Such is the way that change, in general, tends to be. It moves us from the place we've grown accustomed to, even if it's a bad place, to a brand new, unfamiliar, disorienting place.

We move from school to our first job. It's exciting – a paycheck, benefits, putting what we've learned to practice, a new experience, new options, new potential. It's also scarier than heck. Will I measure up? Will I be able to keep up? Will I be able to adjust to this 'new' that is coming at me all at once? Will I survive this transitional time when I must learn a new routine, a new way of living, a new way of being? It's terrifying!

It's something I felt acutely when we brought each of our children home for the first time. It was exhilarating. I had never fell so deeply in love so quickly before. I was now a Dad. What this new chapter meant for my still young family was bursting with exciting potential. It was also scarier than heck! Would I measure up? Would my children need therapy for the rest of their lives because they got stuck with a Dad like me? Would I be able to provide for their needs, keep them safe, properly nurture them so they could grow into confident adults?

After my daughter was born and the three of us drove home from the

hospital for the first time, I clearly knew nothing in my life would ever be the same. That is transformation, transfiguration, a shift so dramatic that you can't help but to sense that everything, and I mean everything, will be forever different. There's no going back to what once was.

Both of today's passages are filled with a sense of exhilaration as well as terror resulting from the transfigurative event experienced by those who were involved. In each case, there would be no going back... the new had taken hold and the past was in the past.

The second King's passage begins with the announcement that the great prophet Elijah would be taken up in a whirlwind. Never before, in the history of the Hebrew people, had any of their leaders departed in such a way. Even Moses was not taken up in a whirlwind as Elijah would soon be.

Obedient as he had always been to God's instructions, Elijah begins his final journey. He tells his apprentice, Elisha, that this is a journey he must make alone. Elisha cannot, must not join him.

It's difficult to say why Elijah makes such a demand. Was Elijah testing Elisha to see if he had the courage and fortitude to push back against his master's command? We don't know.

Elisha adamantly refuses, telling Elijah that as long as Elijah lives, he would not leave his side. Was Elisha's resistance a sign of loving devotion? Was it Elisha's desperate attempt to cling to his Master for as long as he possibly could? This was big stuff that Elisha was dealing with and I can't help but to believe that the prospect of losing his teacher was absolutely terrifying.

It is moving, however, to witness the deep and stubborn love Elisha had for his beloved teacher. This is especially true when we consider how disposable relationships tend to be in our current time. True friends, as they say, are those who stick by you even when the going gets tough. It is not easy to find such deep and abiding friendships but, when we do, we know they are worth their weight in gold.

The passage is filled with a sense of foreboding, mystery, and anticipation. The journey that Elijah makes, with Elisha in tow, is one of numerous stops.

First there is Bethel, the place where Jacob once escaped to, fearing the retribution of his brother, Esau. It's also the place where Jacob wrestled with God.

'Psst,' the company of prophets whispered in Elisha's ear while there, 'Do you know where this is heading? Soon the Lord will take your Master from you.'

I am uncertain who this company of prophets was. Some suggest they were a group of people who lived on the periphery of society, finding in each other mutual support while being encouraged to use prophecy as a means of bringing about change to the social order.

'I know,' Elisha tells this group. 'Be silent.'

The next stop was Jericho. You know - 'Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho...and the walls came tumblin down.' It was the first city that Joshua led the Hebrew people to when entering the Promised Land.

Again, the company of Prophets pester Elisha, saying, 'Hey Elisha, you know today's the day when your Master is going to be taken away from you!'

'I know, already!' Elisha repeats. 'Be silent.'

Next stop is the river Jordan. In a land where water was scarce, the Jordan was a life line as well as a place of divine significance for the Hebrew people. It's the place where numerous miracles had taken place and the place where the Israelites had crossed over under the leadership of Joshua.

Each one of the stops that Elijah made on his way to his departure was filled with holy significance. One would think that if something big was going to happen, it would be in one of these places. Yet, it's in the wilderness, a place outside of these established, holy landmarks, where this extraordinary story reaches its climax. Elijah and Elisha are alone... far away from the company of prophets as well as all other eyes and ears.

Sensing the worry that filled his apprentice's heart, Elijah grants Elisha a final request.

'What can I do for you, Elisha, before I am taken away?' He asks.

Elisha's response is quick and clear. 'Let me have a double portion of your spirit.'

Elisha's request was not so much asking Elijah to make him twice the prophet that Elijah was but was more about what a father would give an Eldest Son, making him the heir of the family name. Elisha wanted to be Elijah's eldest son, his true prophetic heir with all the tools that come with taking over the family business.

It's a tall order but one that is not unfamiliar to us. Instigated by the fear of not measuring up, we yearn for the wisdom of our teachers, our mentors, our skilled and experienced friends who have taught and shaped us along the way. As we shift from apprentice to being on our own, we ask ourselves, in times of trouble, what would my teacher do? In times when we find our wisdom unable to match the demands of the situation at hand, we covet our teacher's wisdom and feel inadequate because we cannot do what they surely would have been able to do.

Yes, Elijah give me a double portion of your spirit. Give me your assurance that I'm up to the task. Give me a blessing I can look back on when I need assurance that all will be okay when everything feels anything but okay.

It is, my friends, the way of transformation, of transfiguration, of divine glory encounters. They are moments not for the faint-hearted. They are for followers who must reconcile themselves to the fact that in becoming who we are meant to be, there is no such thing as playing it safe. They are for congregations being called out of their sheltered places to the wild places where God acts in unpredictable ways. They are moments specially designed for each of us - calling us to do and go even though we might feel ill equipped, unready, and, frankly, terrorized by the idea of carrying the mantle our teachers left us.

In a scene all too poignant, the story ends with Elisha standing near the edge of the Jordan, holding in his hand the mantle dropped by Elijah as he was carried away. If I had been Elisha, I think I would have been tempted to never leave that wilderness. I would have been all too aware of what awaited me on the other side of that river – a crowd of anxious eyes wondering if I had the metal to take over where Elijah had left off. As

soon as they saw me coming, they'd start measuring me up. Will he preach as well as Elijah did? Will he take care of us with the same kind of compassion Elijah had? Will he lead with the same kind of wisdom Elijah led us with? Will he pick the hymns we like to sing?

Of course, I would already know the answer to those questions as I'm sure Elisha did. Heck, no! I could never be Elijah but what I had been called to be is Elisha – filled with doubts, and questions, and hesitations, and absolute terror over the prospect of carrying the mantel left to me by my Mentor and friend.

And so, with enormous courage, with terror shaking the core of his being, Elisha lifts his master's mantle and taps the surface of the Jordan. In response, it parts, just as it did for Elijah, inviting Elisha to cross over into the role of Prophet. A role Elisha believed he could never fill but a role God knew he could if he would only try.

It is, my friends, the way of transformations, of transfigurations, of rivers inviting us to cross over. If we allow our fears to define us, instead God's confidence; if we allow our terrors to consume us, instead God's promises; if we allow our doubts to paralyze us instead of allowing God's visions to energize us, the lonely wilderness will forever be our home. And, in the end, the loss is immeasurable not only for ourselves but also for those who so sorely need to know that God is still with us.

And so, beloved and called sisters and brothers, be brave, be courageous, be bold even though your heart might be gripped with terror. The last thing our world needs is more prisoners of fear. What we need are more Elishas. Not sure footed, perfect, all wise, all knowing prophets but prophets who have heeded the call to step out into the river, treading the path of God's promises. It is the way this transfiguration Sunday becomes real in our lives. It is the way we move from apprentice to the people God knows we can be.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Holy God, we gather in this place this morning wondering what river we are being asked to cross at this point in our lives. We know that your will is enacted in this world through people just like us – filled with hesitation and doubts, fear and worries. We know that your visions find the soil, they take root in, in hearts just like our own, in churches just like this place, and in communities as unsuspecting as this one is. And so, O Lord, we have come this morning expecting little, but we are leaving with the hope that your glory might so shine that we can't help but to become the people you know we can be.

O Lord, where we have grown complacent and weary, transfigure us.

Where our fears have left us curled up in the wilderness instead of returning to the awaiting crowds with determination and courage, transfigure us.

Where our church has hesitated to be the shining light it has been called to be, transfigure us.

Where our nation's leaders have faltered and withdrawn rather than being the blazing light of grace you know they can be, transfigure us.

Where worldly powers have succumbed to being apprentices of fear, rather than prophets of risky hope, transfigure us.

Where our resistance to cross the river of your call, has left your creation in a continuing worsening condition for our children and children's children, transfigure us.

Where those who are ill and frightened and frail and despondent struggle, transfigure them with your healing and wholeness.

We especially ask you to hear these prayers we now boldly mention in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.