

Grief and Amazement

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2 Kings 2; Mark 9:2-9
Transfiguration Sunday, February 11, 2024
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

Moments of transfiguration change you. By the grace of God, moments and experiences of transfiguration – times when the veil between heaven and earth grows very thin – can happen anytime and anywhere, and by the grace of God, these moments change you. As we said in our Call to Worship: “The glory of God transfigures the everyday.” God uses these moments of transfiguration, these experiences of the glory of God – which can happen in a million different ways, there is no single, one-size-fits-all pattern – God uses our experiences of the kingdom to change us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This kind of transformation is what happens to Peter, James, and John on the mountaintop in our text from Mark 9, and this kind of transformation is what you and I are invited to in our lives. Transformation into the likeness of Christ may not happen all at once, and it may not happen overnight, but transformation into the likeness of Christ is what you and I are invited to, over the course of our lives.

On Transfiguration Sunday, we are drawn towards an *experience* of the kingdom of God. This is about more than doing what is right, it is about more than believing certain doctrinal statements. It is about *experiencing* the kingdom of God. In Mark 9:1, the verse right before our text, Jesus tells his disciples, “Truly I say to you, there are some here who will not taste death until they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.” And then immediately after that, in verse 2, Peter, James, and John go up on the mountain with Jesus, and they see him in his glory, transfigured before them, crossing the boundaries of time and space, talking with Moses and Elijah, the great prophets of Hebrew faith. They experience the life of the kingdom, and you and I are invited to experience the kingdom of God in our lives, as well. And experiences of the kingdom change you.

What our two texts, from 2 Kings as well as Mark 9, suggest to us is that the life of the kingdom of God is not a lazy life of playing golf all day long, as much as some people might think that would be all right. It is a life, in which every aspect of our lives – grief and loss, along with amazement and awe – everything is drawn up into, and held within, the transformative glory of God.

2 Kings 2 is an intense text, with a lot going on, and you may want to have your Bible open up as we spend a bit of time in it. The great and mighty prophet Elijah (the same one who turns up in the Mark text) is about to be taken away, and his disciple Elisha knows that it’s going to happen. This text has echoes of Jesus’ intense last days with his disciples in the New Testament gospels, where the disciples are told that he is going to be taken from them, and they aren’t sure they want to hear that.

Elijah tries a couple of times to get Elisha to stay behind, but Elisha refuses – “I will not *leave* you.” The word that Elisha uses for ‘leave’ is the same word that Psalm 22 uses to cry, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” and it is the same word that Isaiah 54 uses to say, “For a brief moment I abandoned you.” Elisha tells his mentor, I will not forsake you or abandon you. He knows what it is coming, and he refuses to leave Elijah’s side. Abandonment is apparently on Elisha’s mind, as he repeats this several times to Elijah. We sense that this could be an expression of his own grief over what he dreads to be Elijah’s abandonment of him. Elisha’s insistence here reminds us of Peter’s declaration to Jesus in Matthew 26, “Even if everyone else becomes a deserter because of you, I will never desert you.”

Elijah and Elisha make their way through several towns, and the company of prophets from Bethel and Jericho come out to see them, and they also know that Elijah’s going away. “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” We don’t know whether they ask this in an attempt to be comforting, inquiring into Elisha’s pain; or whether they ask it in a mocking way, perhaps out of their envy of the close relationship that Elisha had with Elijah. In any event, Elisha is focused on Elijah, and has no bandwidth for any conversation with them, so he dismisses them, with a “Yes, I know. Be quiet.”

Elijah and Elisha then approach the Jordan River. In biblical imagination, the Jordan River is not just any body of water; it is one of the thin places in the Bible, where heaven and earth come very close to each other. You’ve likely had your own thin places in your life, where the presence of God has been especially palpable for you, places of great moments of transition and change, of loss and renewal in your life.

Elijah strikes the water with his mantle, the waters part, and there is a crossing over for Elijah and Elisha, meant to evoke the memory of the Exodus crossing over, when God led the Israelites out of slavery and bondage on dry ground. If we didn’t know it before, we now know that Elijah and Elisha are in what sociologists call a ‘liminal moment,’ a threshold moment, when life shifts and changes. Liminal moments of transition and transfiguration change you.

A wedding can be a liminal moment, as can the death of a loved one; the time when your child goes off to preschool for the first time or off to college, when you get a driver’s license, when you get your first job, when you retire, when you downsize your home. Pivot points, liminal moments, transitional moments happen throughout our lives. Sometimes, we plow right through them, and try not to notice the changes that are happening, and sometimes the grief and loss that are welling up within us. These are intense moments that we participate in, but we may also become aware that we are being carried across these thresholds to a new life by a power greater than ourselves.

When the visual spectacle of a chariot of fire takes Elijah away from Elisha, Elisha cries out, ‘Father! Father!’ and you can feel the grief in his voice. But Elisha also

experiences the passing on of authority to him, undergoes a change in himself, as he picks up Elijah's mantle, which reminds us of how it can feel in a family or an organization when an older generation hands over leadership and decision-making to a younger generation.

Moments of transition and transfiguration happen all the time, and they are loaded and freighted with transformative energy, if we allow them to get through to us.

Mark 9, like 2 Kings 2, has to do with a great visual spectacle. Peter, James, and John, the core three leaders of the 12 disciples, behold the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. Jesus is dazzling bright, infused with a light that is not available to human ingenuity or effort. Hollywood's best technology pales with artificial sparkle next to the radiance that flows from the grace of God. Peter, we are told, does not know what to say, so he babbles about building 3 dwellings, so they can just make it last.

But the Lord does not lead us into transitional moments to dazzle us and leave us there. Jesus does not lead us to mountaintop experiences just so we can tell our friends what a cool experience we have had. Transitional, liminal, mountaintop, transfiguration moments are exhilarating and beautiful, and God graciously gives them to us – sometimes out of the blue - to energize us and to change us – because our lives are not lived on the mountaintop. Our lives are lived, as verse 9 says, "down the mountain."

So God tells Peter, James, and John, in verse 7: "Listen to him!" God's voice on the mountaintop is reminiscent of God's voice at Jesus' baptism, where God also announces, "This is my Son, the Beloved," but here God adds: "Listen to him!" There was great visual spectacle on the mountain that day, but visual spectacles can easily become just that – a spectacle, distracting us and keeping us from the diligent practice of following Jesus day by day. God summons the disciples not to get overly fixated on how awesome their experience has been, but to let the transcendence of their experience infuse their obedience with power and joy and energy.

In very much the same way, our mountaintop experience of Transfiguration Sunday now flows into the season of Lent, when we are invited to let God shape us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, following where he leads us to go. In just a minute, you'll be hearing more from Pastor Layne during the announcements about our Lenten Mission and Service Pledge, ways that you can follow Jesus during the upcoming season of Lent, involving yourself in the mission and service ministry of this congregation, responding to some area of need in our community. These pathways for mission are offered to you as ways for you to allow your own mountaintop experiences of transfiguration, times when you have glimpsed the tender mercy of God or the glorious majesty of God, flow into life-changing service.

The kingdom of God is at hand, we are told in the opening words of the gospel. The kingdom of God – the radiant, tender, glorious, poignant, beautiful, merciful kingdom of God, where deep griefs are held, where old hatreds are resolved, where ugly sins are forgiven, where the human dignity of all persons is honored, where swords and weapons of war are converted into plowshares and tools for nourishing the world – the kingdom of God is at hand, and you and I are being summoned to be changed, in order to live our lives in congruence with it. To God and to God alone, be the glory. Amen.