

## When Seeing Isn't Believing

How many times have you said to yourself, or perhaps confided to someone that you really wished that God would give you a sign, would actually show you what you should do in a particular situation...you know like he did with Moses,...or the way he did in those acts of healing or casting out of demons that we have recorded in scriptures....then surely our way would be clear how to handle the situation. If we had been there on that mountain top when the veil was parted, when the glory of Jesus shown so brightly, then any uncertainty in our lives would be gone; we would have had no doubts and would have certainly obeyed that voice from heaven totally following the instruction...you know, the one that said: "Listen to him!" There is within each and every one of us this deep desire and yearning to move out of the confusion and ambivalence found in our lives into a safe and absolute knowing about all the mysteries of life and faith. "Be careful what you ask for," is what this week's Hebrew Scripture reading might say in response to that desire. In it, Elisha persists in following Elijah to the final moment when he knows that the Lord is about to take Elijah up to heaven. He knows the parting is coming, but he refuses to be separated. Elijah tries to persuade Elisha to stay behind so he will not witness the actual parting...but Elisha insists on going, on being a witness. Elijah has trained Elisha. There is now a community of prophets around them to help support Elisha as he continues his role as prophet, but Elisha does not want their comfort or support. Instead, he clings stubbornly to his mentor to the very end. For Elisha, when this moment at the River Jordan comes, when he witnesses this parting, what is the meaning that it will have for him? Our passage begins by telling us that this parting will be dramatic. God is about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind. As Elijah travels from Gilgal to Bethel and then on to Jericho, at each place Elijah tries to get Elisha to stop and let him go on alone. He refuses. At each stop, the company of prophets remind Elisha that this is the day that Elijah would be taken. Elisha, quite rudely, refuses to listen to them. When they reach the Jordan River, the company of prophets stand some distance away, but Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan after Elijah causes the river to part. This is the critical moment. Elijah asks Elisha what he could do for him. Elisha, knowing he would be taking over Elijah's role asks, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." Elijah answers, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." The passage tells us that Elisha got quite a show. He definitely got to see Elijah leave. There came a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. Elijah ascended into heaven in a

whirlwind. But seeing this did not seem to bring Elisha any comfort, any sense he received what he had asked. He kept watching and crying out, until he could no longer see Elijah. Then he grasped his own clothes and tore them into two pieces. He grieves. It wasn't the sight of the chariot that gave Elisha what he sought. The vision of Elijah ascending came and then departed. There was no afterglow of power or surge of prophetic authority from the sight as Elisha lay grieving in the dust by the river Jordan. There was only silence and the experience of loss. In the silence of the grief there was only an old, tattered cloak, waiting to be noticed. The story of Elisha continues past our reading this morning when Elisha gets up. It continues with Elisha picking up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him. He took that mantle and struck the water of the Jordan saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When he struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other and Elisha went over. It wasn't the vision that gave Elisha his answer...his answer came when he still had no idea whether Elijah's "double portion" rested on him, or not. It came when he picked up the cloak, approached the river, and did his grief stricken best to follow in his beloved master's footsteps, to find where the Lord, the God of Elijah was. His answer came in the seeking with battered faith, trembling faith, scorched faith, with faith seeking direction. It is faith that remains after the chariots leave. Sometimes it isn't the miraculous elements in these stories which make them ours...it is the truth that it is the ordinary human experiences which stand at the sidelines of these stories, the grief filled follower who has now to assume a role for which he may not feel prepared, the who has witnessed the unveiling of God and does not understand, but still moves forward in faith to follow where the voice of God leads. There are several points which connect this text from the Hebrew Scriptures to the gospel passage from Mark. Obviously the Mark passage appears because we will enter the season of Lent on Wednesday, and the liturgical calendar always addresses this moment of the Transfiguration or unveiling of the glory of the Lord as the preface to beginning the journey to the cross. Miraculous appearances of both Moses and Elijah to talk with Jesus as well as the dazzling white appearance of Jesus himself also connect to elements in the Hebrew text, elements that often make us uncomfortable...like that whirlwind and chariot and those horses of fire which swept Elijah away. Sometimes, we like to ignore these passages which describe visions which we cannot explain...they don't fit our rational categories. We don't like to consider too closely what truths these passages might reveal to us. And we, as clergy, often feel called to give explanations for what happened on that mountain top when Jesus went up there to pray with Peter, James and John.

Why did Jesus' clothing become dazzling white? And just what kind of white was it that no bleach could produce? How could Moses and Elijah be there when they lived so long ago? And just how did the disciples recognize who they were? Was this a dream? How could they all have the same dream? Transfigured means literally means to change figure or form. So the passage says that Jesus' appearance was changed. To his terrified disciples, Jesus must have looked like an angel. Since Mark's gospel does not have a resurrection story, some scholars say this is Mark's resurrection story. Sometimes we get too involved in trying to explain mysteries when that may obscure the more obvious message. But what this passage does give us is that here on the mountain Jesus appears in a blazing light in a cloudy-misty like space talking with those who lived centuries before who represent the Law and the Prophets of Jewish tradition. This passage, this point in Mark's narrative marks an in-between space—between Epiphany which began with the journey of the Magi and Lent which begins Jesus' journey to the cross. That may be more important for us to consider. Some call this in between space a liminal space, from a word meaning "threshold". A liminal state is characterized by ambiguity and openness. There is often a sense of disorientation. This seems to be what has happened to Peter. He didn't know what to do! We usually just think he wanted to hold onto the moment. And that was probably a part of it. But Peter was a man of action, and often when we are unsure, we just want to do something. In this situation, Peter was terrified and so his response was to take action. So Peter wanted to build three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He wanted to capture Jesus' dazzling brightness, to make sure Moses and Elijah didn't get away. But before he could take any action or even finish talking, a cloud overshadowed the disciples. They remembered stories from their ancestors—the cloud on the mountain as a sign of God's presence in the wilderness. Then a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." As suddenly as the vision appeared, Moses and Elijah were gone. Jesus was standing there alone, looking as he always did. The disciples did not get any answers from their vision. They did not hear any of the conversation among Moses, Elijah and Jesus. They did not get any explanation about Jesus' changed appearance. Their part in the experience was to be told to listen to what Jesus told them, and on the way down the mountain he told them not to speak of what had happened until after "the son of Man had risen from the dead." They listened, at least as far as not telling anyone else, but spoke of it among themselves, "questioning what this rising from the dead could mean." But in this 21<sup>st</sup> century when we are so uncomfortable with these stories, what do we

make of this passage? We aren't likely to think we will encounter Moses and Elijah on a mountain top or blurt out that we think we should build shelters for them, but perhaps we might feel the need to build shelters for the homeless? Jesus didn't give Peter any answer to Peter's suggestion for Moses and Elijah were no longer there and they descended from the mountain top. But the voice from heaven had given a command: "This is my Son, the Beloved: Listen to him." That voice does not want us to stand looking up at the clouds. "Listen to my Beloved Son." And Jesus continued to teach them after they went back into the valley. And when we listen to what Jesus taught we hear many things. And when we listen to Jesus, we hear: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." When we listen to Jesus, we hear: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." When we listen to Jesus, we hear: "The cup I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." We listen to the Son, the Beloved, and we hear a clear call to join our hearts with will all those who hunger, with all who have needs. When we listen to the Son, we hear a clear call to build a safe place for those in danger, especially the children of the world. With Jesus, it becomes clear that, we too, are meant to be transfigured. We are to be transfigured, not as Jesus is, but as his disciples have been, as disciples of all times and places are; disciples who shine with Jesus' presence in our lives. We are to wear robes that may become dirty from being involved with those who suffer, may become soiled by cleaning up the mess of this broken world. We are to wear the robes of justice, the garments of peace. We are to be dazzling with the light that spots abuse, anger and anxiety and then bathes them with peace. We are to be transfigured as disciples of Jesus. We are to be transfigured so we can bear the dazzling light of our Lord into the world. We are to be transfigured so that those who see the way we live can see in us the presence of our Lord, for it is not our words which demonstrate the Lord's presence in our lives. It isn't seeing our worship attendance which leads to belief in God's nearness or presence in this world; it is seeing how we have listened to the teachings of our Lord and followed them that will spread the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.