

## **A Journey of Change – 2 Kings 2:1-12 – February 11, 2018**

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Transfiguration Sunday is the Sunday before the start of Lent. On this day the church remembers a defining event that occurred during the ministry of Jesus. It is recorded in the three Synoptic Gospels, and Mark tells us the story succinctly. Today is also the final Sunday in the season of Epiphany, so it is appropriate that the story includes a rather profound epiphany event.

Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, up onto a high mountain. As it's described, the transfiguration is quite an amazing event, and the three disciples don't know what to make of it. They recognize the figures of Elijah and Moses talking to their teacher. That in itself is astounding, as those two figures held such a prominent position in Israel's history. But then add the changing of the appearance of Jesus' clothes to a bright white color and the appearance of a massive cloud on the mountainside, and the voice God booming across the sky, and you have the potential for some understandable anxiety.

And then just as suddenly, everything was gone, and the scene was back to normal. The men hike back down the mountain. Perhaps they even wondered if they had been caught up in some type of mass hallucination or vision, but then Jesus orders them to keep quiet about what had happened. So something really did happen, they must have realized. It was not only Jesus who was transfigured on that mountain. The disciples were also changed. Their lives took on new meaning, new direction. They may not have fully understood what had taken place. But they knew it was something big. And following Jesus wasn't just following some random teacher. Following him meant following God.

I can imagine them, years later, looking back on that event – that moment of epiphany, of truly experiencing the presence of God. The fear of the moment was replaced by a powerful impression of awe and wonder. Perhaps it became a great motivator for them, or provided fuel in times of weariness. There was something incredibly significant about that experience with Jesus up on the mountain.

Is it any wonder that Christians have adopted the phrase "It was a mountaintop experience" to describe any type of epiphany event or God moment that happens in their lives? In those times when the presence of God is felt profoundly or intensely, and, because of those experiences, our lives change. We are transfigured or transformed. The changes can happen in a number of ways. Perhaps we draw into closer relationship with God. Perhaps we feel a sense of affirmation for the path God has presented to us in our lives. Perhaps an answer to a significant prayer has been revealed to us. Perhaps we are given sense of mission to pursue part of God's will in the world. Whatever it is, the experience of the divine has somehow changed us in a significant way.

For Jesus himself, the experience gave him the assurance that he was on the right path. Just as in his baptism he was claimed by God in the voice speaking from heavens, on the mountainside, God's voice from the cloud gave him the affirmation he needed to continue moving forward. His journey back down the mountain, back into the valley, was a foreshadowing of what was to come in the not so distant future. He sensed what was coming, and in this epiphany moment, he knew that God was with him.

The epiphany moment doesn't always happen up on the mountain. If we look at the story from 2 Kings, we see a different kind of Transfiguration. The story presents to us the changing of the prophetic leadership from Elijah to Elisha that takes place over the course of a journey. As the journey begins, Elijah tells his disciple in Gilgal that he has been sent by God onward toward Bethel. Elijah instructs him to remain there in Gilgal. But Elisha refuses to leave his side, and swears to stay with him. They travel on.

The local prophets meet them, and speak to Elisha, saying, "Don't you know that your master will be taken from you today by God?" And the younger man responds to them, "Yes, I know. Be quiet about it." And then Elijah, says to him, "The Lord has called me farther on, to go to Jericho. Why don't you stay here?" But again, Elisha refuses, making an oath to stay by his side no matter what. When they arrive at Jericho, the same thing happens again. The local prophets come out to greet them, they tell the young disciple that Elijah will be taken away by God, and Elisha responds, "Yes, I know that. Quit bringing it up."

A third time, Elijah tells the younger Elisha that he has been directed by God to journey on to the Jordan. He tells his disciple to stay in Jericho, but again, Elisha declines and makes a solemn vow to stay with him. This time 50 of the prophets came along, but kept their distance from the two.

Elijah and Elisha approached the Jordan, and in an action reminiscent of Moses parting the Red Sea at the Exodus, Elijah rolled up his mantle and struck the river, making a path of dry ground across it. The two men crossed over. Elijah turned to his disciple, and in anticipation of his departure, asked him if there was something he could do for him. Elisha responded by asking for a double portion of his spirit. What does that "double portion" mean? What he meant by that was that he wanted to be treated as Elijah's heir, his spiritual son, for according to the laws of inheritance only the true heir would inherit a double portion of the master's estate. He was asking to be the prophetic successor to Elijah.

Elijah admitted that that was a difficult request, because he himself was not in the position to grant it. The older man knew that only God could grant the prophetic spirit. Elisha would have to wait and see if God allowed him to witness the prophet's departure. He would have to rely upon God to answer that request. They continued the journey, walking and talking together until a chariot of fire came between them. Elisha could only watch helplessly as his mentor was carried up into heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha was left alone, on the far side of the Jordan River, outside of the Promised Land. He was alone, vulnerable, and full of grief. He despaired over the loss of his spiritual father. But in the moment of witness, he got his answer. His prophetic path was confirmed and he was transformed.

Over the journey, traveling from location to location, Elisha displayed his readiness and his persistence to succeed Elijah in his role. He was given three opportunities to turn away from the path placed before him, but he remained firm. He was loyal to his master to the very end. Yet in the end, his master could not give him what he asked for. He could only guide him to look to God for the answer he sought. Elisha learned to focus on God, and to follow God's leading in his life. In his moment of great sorrow and vulnerability, he was transformed into God's prophet.

While the mountaintop type epiphanies are thrilling and powerful, we cannot remain on the mountain for very long. We have to come back down to the real world of daily living. We may have those types of experiences as adolescents at a Christian Camp like Pilgrim Center, or as adults on a spiritual weekend retreat, or on a special trip far away from home. It's easier to come into contact with God during one of these focused events, because they are often structured in such a way to facilitate the transforming moment. We're not bogged down with the distractions of life at home, so we can relax and listen for God to speak to us.

Numerous times have I heard people describing this kind of powerful experience, that was for them a life-changing moment. Immediately following the transformation, they seem infused with energy and determination. Yet it doesn't take long before the drudgery of daily living creeps back in, and the God-focused excitement begins to be overshadowed by worldly responsibilities and time constraints. The epiphany moment fades over time.

We continue on, seeking out another mountaintop event, hoping to reclaim that powerful feeling. But transformation doesn't just happen up on the mountain. We can find ourselves greeted by those God-moments in the unexpected places of life. On the long journey of faith, as we remain committed and persistent in following the path placed before us – just as Elisha remained a faithful and determined disciple up to the very end. Or in the seemingly random places that lie outside the boundaries of what we would consider the Promised Land – just as, in a rather surprising place, on the other side of the Jordan River, Elijah was taken by the whirlwind and Elisha was confirmed by God on his prophetic path. Or in those times of grief and powerless, where we experience some of our greatest vulnerability, when our defenses are down and suddenly God slips in and we find purpose and hope in God – when Elisha felt the profound grief of losing his master, he was vulnerable and open to God's leading.

Transformation can occur at any time in our lives. In the high moments when the energy and excitement of a particular experience can reveal the presence of God. Or in the low moments of our deepest pathos and helplessness when God comes in bringing new hope and purpose. Or even in those moments in between – in the long journey of faith, where persistent focus on the path placed before us can reveal the subtle workings of God in our lives.

As we head into the season of Lent, may we be ever open to those transforming moments along the way, no matter how big or how small. No matter how powerful or how mundane, let us listen for God's voice in our lives.