Last Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

Today is the **Last Sunday after the Epiphany**, and we always get the story of the **transfiguration** on this Sunday. It's awfully tempting to focus on that glorious **mountaintop experience** and miss all the **complexity** and **layers** of this day because *this* day **isn't just about light and glory**, but it is **also about hard things and shadows**.

In **II Kings**, we walk with **Elijah** and **Elisha** in their last journey as mentor prophet and prophet mentee. **Elijah** keeps trying to release **Elisha** from what is to come, but Elisha won't budget. **Three times**, **Elijah** tells **Elisha** to **stay put**; **three times Elisha** makes clear that **he won't leave** his mentor; **two times** the **company of prophets** tell **Elisha**, **"You know that today the LORD will take your master away from you, right?" Elisha** replies: **"Yep, I know, be silent"**—kind of the ancient equivalent of **"zip it."** By the **third time**, the **company of prophets don't even try to deter Elisha** from following his master.

When **they cross over the Jordan**, and it's just the two of them, and **Elijah asks what he can do for Elisha before he's taken away from him**. There's no mincing words here; no silverlining it; no soft-pedaling. *And that full turn into the reality of the moment allows a very real conversation to unfold*. **"Please, Elijah, let me inherit a double share of your spirit."** Did **Elisha** really understand what he was asking for? **Elijah** responds, "**Oh, you've asked a hard thing. If you see me being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."** That's clear and concise and contains multitudes: ***"Elisha, if you can endure the pain of the parting, the separation, then you will be ready; then you will know what to do with all that's coming your way because a double share of my spirit means double trouble for a prophet."***

Well, **Elisha** did **stay present** to the **chariots of fire**, and the **whirlwind**, and to his **beloved mentor moving on**. Amidst all that **turmoil**, he just **kept his eyes trained on Elijah**, and at some point, **he saw him no more**, and **grief swallowed him**, and he **grasped his clothes** and he **tore them in two pieces**. *And that's where the passage stops today, not with what comes next, but with the pain of grief.*

Yes, in due course, like in the **next verse**, **Elisha** will **pick up Elijah's mantle**; he'll **part the waters of the Jordan**, and he will **pass through**, **pass beyond**, **pass into a new life** where his **beloved master no longer walks in front of him**, or **even beside him**, but **walks *with* him from *within***. But ***to be able to* pass into his new life**, **Elisha *must* pause and grieve his old one**.

It's **not just about the glory of the mantle** that now falls to him; it's about ***allowing*** his **heart** and **mind** and **soul** to be **tempered**, to be **shaped**, to be **refined** by **pain** and **grief** and **sorrow**, and ***then* releasing that too** to **move forward in the life** that **now** is **yours** with the **confidence** and **knowledge** that *that* **double share of spirit** *now* **lives *within* you**.

Our passage from II Corinthians gives us **more layers**, and there are some really interesting images here. The **language is harsh**—**Paul** speaks of a **veiled gospel** and **people perishing** and **being blind** and **unbelievers**, but the **Greek is more pained** *than* **harsh**. A better rendering might be that **the gospel** is sometimes **hidden**, sometimes **stolen** from **those who are lost**, and ***who of us doesn't feel lost from time to time?***

And for **Paul**, there are **two things** that make it **so hard to see** and **find our way**: the **god of this world**—think all the **distractions** that **pull our gaze from what really matters**—and the **inability to trust**.

And **Paul** is right—when **I am distracted** and when **I don't trust**, it's **just harder to see anything beyond my own spinning thoughts**, ***even the good news of the gospel*** is **veiled**, **hidden** to me, and when my **trust gets really low**, it feels like that ***good news*** has **been stolen away**.

It's **easy to get lost in this world**; **trust** is so **vulnerable** and **risky**, and it's **easy to lose it**; but **when we pull back**, we **lose so much more**. We **get lost in the shadows**, and **all that we have learned** and **experienced**, **all** that has **been revealed to us**, **all** the **ah-ha's we've had along the way**—**they are harder to take in** and **harder to shine forth**.

BUT, God is no stranger to the darkness and the shadows.

God's been at this **light** and **dark thing** since the **dawning of creation itself**, and **in our deepest dark** where **the glory of God seems a pipedream**, the **face of Jesus Christ will find us**, **full of compassion and mercy**, and **that companionship** is **light enough** to **illuminate the next step in front of us**. And **like with Elisha**, **whatever light we've looked to *out there***, we **come to discover lives right *in here*** (our heart).

And then we come to the **transfiguration story**. We know it well. **Jesus takes Peter and James and John up on a high mountain apart. Jesus** is **transfigured**, **changed**, **transformed right before their eyes**. And all the sudden, **Elijah** and **Moses** are there **chatting it up with Jesus**.

Peter, ever the bold one, he wants to get to the ***doing* part** right away. ***"Let's build things!" Let's build tabernacles—one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. This is it, Jesus—we've got you and all the law and the prophets right here; let's capture this like lightning in a bottle. That would be so cool, Jesus!"*** I love Peter.

Originally, the **tabernacle** was a **tent**, and it was **resting place** for the **Divine Presence** so that it **could accompany the Israelites wherever they went**. But somewhere along the way, the **tabernacle** *became* a **temple**, and a **place to mark the Holy in their midst** *became* a **place to contain it**. It's a fine line between **marking Holy Presence** and **thinking we control it**. And generally, **God's not much for being confined** or **limited**, **constrained** or **contained**. ***God wants to move how God wants to move in this world.***

And **John 1** tells us that **God turned this whole tabernacle thing on its head** when **the Word became flesh**. The Greek here is so beautiful: This **Word**, this **Word who was in the beginning**,

this **Word who was with God**, this **Word who *was* God *pitched a tent* in our flesh**, and not just in **Jesus' flesh**, but in **human flesh**, in **your flesh** and in **my flesh**.

But **let's give Peter the benefit of the doubt**; he **springs into action** because he **doesn't know how to sit** with the **power of this experience** that **just ripped the veil between the realms**. **Time** and **space** and **Jesus himself** have just been utterly **transformed before his eyes**; **ancestors of the faith are present**. It was **completely disorienting**, **terrifying** even. **Most of us** would be **scrambling** to **make sense** of that any way we could, and **getting busy with doing** and **building** seemed as **good an idea as any to Peter**.

But just like with **Elisha** and the **pain** and **grief** that he **had to pass through**, just like the way the **dark and being lost dances** with the **light** in **II Corinthians**, **Peter** and **James** and **John**, they've **got to go into the dark** to **understand** the **depth of this transfigured Life so full of Light**. So, a **cloud** forms, **envelops them** in the **shadow**, **puts them in the dark**, so that they **can't rely on their capacity to see**, but are **forced to listen**, to **listen with everything they've got**: ***"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*** And **reoriented to Jesus' voice**, they **didn't need anything else**. All the **law**, all the **prophets**, **everything** would be **found in him** and **his way of love**.

But they would **have to live through so much** more to **understand** just **how deep that way of love could run**—they would need to **live through** all that **awaits us** in this **Lenten season to come**; they would need to **live through** the **doubts** and **betrayals** and **denials** and **sham trials** and **crucifixions** and **tombs**, and in due course, **the risings, too—Jesus'** and **theirs**—to **understand just how fully** and **completely God plants the Divine Presence** at **ground zero of our lives**.

That's why, as they are **coming down that mountain**, **Jesus tells them not to share the full story yet**, *like they know the ending*, *because they don't*, and *they won't*, **until they go the distance**.

All the glory that shines today is to **ready us for the dark**, *so that*, **as we make our way through the shadows**, we can **discover anew** how to **find the light**, *even when, especially when, we can't see anything at all.*

If you want to **plumb the depths of transfiguration** and **transformation**, **enter the cloud**, and **stay there** until the **only voice left**, the **only voice really worth following**, is the **voice of the Beloved**.

***Then* you will be ready for *all* that is to come**. Amen.

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