

**The Transfiguration of our Lord**  
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**Psalm 50:1-6**

**2 Kings 2:1-12a**

**2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2**

**Mark 9:2-9**

The believers' ultimate goal is to live in the dazzling presence of God. In God's presence there will be fullness of joy; at God's right hand pleasures forevermore. But the trip to that goal is one of faithful pilgrimage, and along the way some would deter us by saying the trip is too hard (2 Kings), or they would have us leap over all present realities to an immediate encounter with God (2 Cor.), or they have us settle for a sneak preview of the glory as if it were the real thing (Mark).

In the Old Testament lesson Elisha embodies the faithful and persistent pilgrim. Three times his master Elijah told him to stop following, but each time Elisha vows, "I will not leave you." Twice the members of the prophetic guild (sons of the prophets) warned him that Yahweh would soon take his master away — as if that would spoil it all — and each time Elisha replied, "I know; be still."

Elisha's persistence was part of his effort to succeed Elijah as prophet. When he walked with Elijah through the Jordan on dry ground, they were repeating the trip of Israel at the Jordan and of Moses at the Red Sea. Elisha asked for a double portion of the spirit so that he would be identified as the principal heir to Elijah. (Deut. 21:17) Once Elijah was taken up, Elisha again took a trip through the Jordan. Being God's child always means reexperiencing the liberation of Exodus and the responsibilities of servanthood.

Elijah could be called "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen" (he was worth divisions!), but to embody the Holy War traditions is to know full well that Yahweh's wars can just as well be waged against his people as for them. The sons of the prophets, who wanted to deter Elisha from seeing his master depart, insisted on organizing a posse to look for him when he had been snatched up to heaven. That search was futile, both because Elisha knew Elijah was nowhere to be found, and because to search for yesterday's leader is to fail to recognize today's leader

and today's task. Elisha's pilgrimage took him to Bethel, just as Elijah's had, and to Mt. Carmel and Samaria as well. Only taunts awaited him in Bethel, while Mt. Carmel and Samaria posed for him the same challenge of idolatry and the same danger of royal hostility as they had for his "father."

Elisha models the ideal stance of faith, ready to face the challenge of faith, ready to face the challenge of change and new beginnings, refusing to shrink from the tasks of discipleship. He demanded a double portion of the spirit, but gave no quarter in exercising the full and dangerous Israelite office of prophet.

The second lesson poses a severe challenge to the preacher. It speaks of an ancient theological argument between Paul's opponents, who claimed unparalleled insight because of their direct access to God, and the apostle himself, who believed that access to God came only through the Lord Jesus, with no short cuts allowed. The glory he claimed through the crucified and risen Jesus was no less than that of his opponents; in fact, their claims are exposed as sham. The glory mediated by the Crucified One leads to persistent personal transformation, and it is the basis for an evangelical ministry that will not give out.

The challenge to today's preacher is to escape an anti-Judaistic trap. Paul's argument with the so-called Jewish Christians of the first century does not legitimate a modern day contrast between Christianity and Judaism, to the detriment of the latter. To act as if all Jews read the Bible in virtual blindness (with a veil over their faces) would be a slur on their living faith, nourished by the Scriptures. The second lesson is a warning about *Christians*, who would claim to know God apart from the cross, or who would act as if God's glory were just for an elite few. Through Jesus Christ we all have access to the Father, and for us Christians, at least, that is the only point of access.

The Gospel of the Transfiguration has a number of links to the two previous lessons. Both of them dealt with manifestations of God's power and glory. The Old Testament lesson spoke of Elijah, who went to heaven without dying, while Moses, whose grave is God's secret, is the center of attention in the second lesson. These two representatives of the Law and the Prophets appeared at the transfiguration, providing points of continuity with God's older dispensation and signalling the ultimate, eschatological character of Jesus. The eschatological curtain was parted for a few moments to reveal Jesus in all his Sonship and glory, in a dazzling display of God's presence. Just to make it clear, a voice intoned: "This is my Son; listen to him."

Listen to him! To his words of healing and forgiveness. To his word from the cross, when even in the midst of forsakenness, he cries out, "My God." To his word of Messianic vocation: "The Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." To his word about the necessity of suffering: "The Son of man must suffer many things and be treated with contempt." No cross, no crown!

Peter, of course, didn't get it. He was willing to settle for the sneak preview and so to bypass the cross. But Jesus had to go that tougher road, as Peter did also, and as did many who made up the audience to whom the Gospel of Mark was addressed. The Good News was not an invitation to camp out on the mountains, with direct access to the likes of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. The invitation was to go with Jesus to the plain, to experience his Exodus from life, perhaps even to join him in this experience.

Peter was right to want to see Jesus as he is. Elisha too, could not be deterred from seeing the razzle-dazzle of his predecessor's departure. But Elisha knew, as Peter did not yet, that the best sequel to the sneak preview, was to walk back across the Jordan and to go to ambivalent places like Bethel, Mt. Carmel, Samaria, and your town, where God's people still need to be served.

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