

The Next Generation
(2 Kings 2; Mk 9)

2/11/24
Rev. J Koyama

Time is flying and we are already on the cusp of Lent. And the Gospel reading for this Sunday is always the story of Jesus's Transfiguration on the Mountain. Jesus and his inner circle of disciples are joined by Moses and Elijah, and Jesus takes on an awe inspiring glow that transcends this world. (A glowing face in the bible is shorthand for a person who is in direct contact with God).

Following this event, Jesus will descend back into the valley of daily life and begin his final journey to Jerusalem where he will be crucified and on the third day raised. And for us also, this event is a signal to join the entourage that will follow him along that road. And it is a signal to us, as we walk with him, to enter into personal reflection on what his journey means in our own lives.

An Unexplainable Awe

Scholars who write about this story often say that there is something about it that defies explanation. Jesus's glowing appearance inspires a sense of mystery and awe that is hard to interpret.

I think this awe is comparable to the way a young child experiences parents or adult role models. I remember that when I was a child, I used to sit in the living room playing with my toys on the floor, while my parents talked about all kinds of things with their grown-up friends; things that I was not yet able to understand. I

remember being keenly interested in hearing what they were saying, and at the same time wondering what in the world they were talking about. It seemed as though my parents understood everything and how everything worked. They looked after me and they were like gods to me.

I was like the disciples who were in awe of Jesus as he spoke with Moses and Elijah in this morning's reading. And I was very curious and anxious to know the secret of the god-like behavior of the adults around me. Just as the disciples wanted to stay and hear more of the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. I wanted to hear more of what the grown ups were saying.

And afterwards I would puzzle over it. (Lent is a time to puzzle over what God is doing). I remember wondering: Could I ever also become someone as truly masterful as my parents and the other adults gathered with them in conversation seemed to be? Would I ever be able to enjoy being part of such a riveting and animated discussion? Where did these God-like powers come from?

My guess is that most children go through something like this. They want to know and they want to be! And they feel as though they are somehow outside of something amazing and they want to be insiders to it. But they don't yet understand how it can happen. They only know that the role model or models that they have latched onto, have some kind of charisma, maybe not an outright dazzling glow, but something that holds them in awe.

It seems to me that each child instinctively feels that there are grown ups who will bring them closer to that destiny that they don't understand, but that God has designed them to seek. And so they try to stay around that person who radiates those qualities that draw them with keen attention. And as each child develops and grows toward adulthood that desire to acquire the same power out of which their role model lives stays with them.

Elisha follows Elijah

If we think about the Transfiguration story this way, then it's easy to connect it with our Old Testament reading about the younger Elisha's relationship with his elder, the great Elijah. Every time Elijah goes somewhere, Elisha sticks to him like glue. Even when Elijah tries to shake him off by telling him to stay put, Elisha swears that he will never leave him and continues to follow him around. And when others tell him that Elijah will leave him, Elisha tries to hush them. He is like that youngster who is so acutely attentive to your every move.

Finally, the time does come for Elijah to be taken away into the heavens in such a way that Elisha cannot follow him. And so Elijah asks the young Elisha what he can do for him, before he goes. And Elisha asks for a double portion of his Spirit. And Elijah replies, "If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted to you, and if not, it will not."

As I understand it, Elisha is saying to Elijah something like: "I want to be like you. I want to live from the same power that has made you such an awesome figure in

my life, I want to have a share in the same power that you have, but that I don't have. When you strike the waters they part. And when I strike them, they don't."

I need to say something about the meaning of "parting the waters" here. You will know that, first and foremost it refers to the moment during the Exodus when God has Moses strike the waters with his staff, parting them so that the Israelites can flee from the Egyptian army that is pursuing them. But, we can also understand "parting the waters" as a metaphor that also applies to all the situations in our lives where we feel trapped and unable to see any way into the future other than being drowned in some way. And then someone does something that miraculously opens a path to a better future that wasn't there before.

God has the power to use people in our lives in such a way as to strike and part the waters before us and open a pathway forward out of bondage and despair. And it was this power that God invested in Elijah that Elisha was drawn to and wanted to possess as well. And so he asked Elijah for this power.

And Elijah's last words to Elisha are key to the handing on of what is essential (the passing of the baton) from one generation to next. He says, "If you see me as I am being taken from you, (what you ask for) will be granted to you." If not, then not.

In my own life, this transition occurred after my father died. So many times during my life, he had spoken words that, to me, were like the "parting of the waters." And so, when he passed in 2009, my heart was torn in two, as Elisha's heart was when Elijah was taken from him. And his passing led me into a period of reflection,

and remembrance that has never really ended. He was my Elijah, and I was his Elisha, who sought to live in the same Spirit that animated his life.

Of course, my dad was not a perfect person. He had some serious flaws. But he was the Elijah that God gave me. And you may recognize that there have been Elijah-like figures in your own life.

Those words: “If you see me as I am being taken from you, (what you ask for) will be granted to you” are a main reason why to my mind funerals are so important. They compel us to really reflect on the loved ones who have gone before us, even as they are being taken from us. And when we reflect on the ways God has used them to “part the waters before us” in our own lives, we internalize their God given power and the line separating their hearts from ours dissolves and their spirits continue to live and bless the world through us.

But the key is to watch them as they go. Because if we don’t watch them as they go, that shared gift will not be granted.

A Positive Story

Today’s story about Elijah and Elisha is a deeply human story, heart wrenching, but in the end also a story that is both joyful and promising, that bodes well for us. It bodes well, because in the end God does transfer the Spirit and power that sustained one generation to the next. After Elijah is taken up, Elisha strikes the water. Nothing happens. There is a moment of uncertainty. But then he tries

again, and this time the water parts. The power that God invested in Elijah has been invested in him. Likewise there comes a time when the power and spiritual depth that God has invested in our generation will belong to those who are now our wide eyed children.

How does this happen? We don't know. God creates caterpillars to eat voraciously and then somehow transfigures them into butterflies. And likewise God creates children hungry for God and turns them into grown ups invested with the power to part the waters.

We worry about the future that our children will inherit. We see what the media and cell phones have done to disrupt the ways we pass on our faith. And Elijah's last words provide us with a caution. In order to receive the double portion of the life giving spirit they seek, children need to have the opportunities to watch us and also to see us as we are being taken from them, *(just as a caterpillar needs the right kind of leaf to munch on)*.

This morning's readings reminds us that the younger generation is watching us, they too were created with a desire to share in the power of salvation and their eyes are glued on us. They are internalizing who we are, the good with the bad, puzzling over what shaped us. Amelia, Conrad, Lily, Adeline, Carson, Keegan, (other names:

They are watching and someday, God willing, they too will strike the waters and the waters will part. And they too will enjoy the blessings that we are pointing to. And the story of God's people will go on in new ways into the future.