

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

B: The Transfiguration of Our Lord
2 Kings 2:1-12

11 February 2024
Salem, Bridgeport

“The Paramount Importance of Personal Experience”

I usually love preaching on the story of the Transfiguration,
but today’s first reading from the Second Book of Kings is so extraordinary
that I feel we need to focus on that.

In a scene that sounds as magical as Dorothy’s trip to Oz,
the prophet Elijah makes an awesome exit from this life.

He doesn’t die, but finds himself in a fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses,
all of which are swept up into heaven by a whirlwind!

The scene is so fantastical that we may miss everything else that’s taking place in the story,
so let me call your attention to what’s going on.

The story of Elijah and his successor Elisha echoes an earlier story from scripture –
the story of Moses and his successor Joshua.

And that story of Moses and Joshua, in turn, echoes an earlier story in the life of Moses.

Moses, you will remember, leads the enslaved Hebrew people out of Egypt,
but when they get to the Red Sea they discover they can go no further.

They are caught between a rock and a hard place,
or specifically, between Pharaoh’s army and the Red Sea.

There is no way out.

But then ... God shows up and performs a miracle, making a way where there was no way!

That is the seminal event in Israel’s history, and you might think that remembering that event
would be enough to cause every succeeding generation to have faith.

Except that that’s not how faith works.

How many of you read the bishops blog last week?

He ends it with these thoughts....

“The 19th-century philosopher and psychologist William James ...

in his classic book, The Varieties of Religious Experience ...

distinguishes between primary religious encounters, which are direct personal experiences,

and secondary religion, which involves teachings about the faith or its organizational aspects....

We may live in a modern world filled with antibiotics, supersonic jets, and indoor plumbing,

but the religious function deep within each human being has not disappeared.

People are hungry and starved for primary religious experience....”

Moses and the Hebrew people had had a primary faith experience,
but Moses' experience was not enough for his successor Joshua
to lead the people across the Jordan river, and into the promised land 40 years later.
Having a secondary faith experience was not enough for Joshua.
He needed a primary faith experience,
and so Joshua does at the Jordan what Moses did at the Red Sea.
And again, God shows up and performs a miracle, making a way where there was no way!

600 years later, we have the story of Elijah and Elisha,
and if you pay attention to the details
you will note that they are retracing Joshua's journey in reverse.
They travel from Gilgah where Israel crossed the Jordan under Joshua,
to Bethel, which is mentioned repeatedly in the story of Joshua,
then to Jericho, the city that fell to Joshua as his first great victory,
and then they go to the Jordan.

And there Elijah strikes the river with his mantle, the water divides,
and the two of them pass over on dry ground,
thus replicating in miniature the original Jordan River passage under Joshua.
Again, it was not enough for Elijah or Elisha to have the secondary religious experience
of hearing what God did for Joshua or what God did for Moses.
They needed their own primary experience.
And so once again God shows up and performs a miracle,
making a way where there is no way.

The story of how God shows up
and performs miracles, and makes ways where there are no ways,
is a story that happens again and again and again.
It wasn't enough for Joshua to know what Moses experienced.
It wasn't enough for Elijah and Elisha to know what Joshua and Moses experienced.
It isn't enough for us to know what Elijah and Joshua and Moses experienced.
It isn't enough for us to know *about* God – we must know God *personally*.
It isn't enough to know that God showed up
and performed miracles and made ways where there was no way for other people.
We need to have experienced how God shows up
and performs miracles, and makes ways where there are no ways for us as well.

So how do we do that?

Our story today illustrates 4 points.

First, we must have faith that it's not a matter of *if* but *when* God will show up.

I want you to notice something about this text.

Go back and look at the very first phrase with me:

"Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind..."

The narrator begins by telling us the end of the story!

Usually storytellers will save the climax to the very end to keep us in suspense,

but here we already know *what* is going to happen, so it's not a matter of *if* but *when*.

In fact, everywhere Elijah and Elisha go, people already know *what* is going to happen.

In Bethel, and again in Jericho, people say to Elisha,

"Do you know that Yahweh will take away your master today?"

And both times Elisha answers, "Yes, I know. Now, be quiet."

Everyone knows *what* is going to happen; they just don't know *when*.

The same is true for us.

If we have faith in God, we do not have to wonder about the *if*, just the *when*.

It is not *if* God will show grace, but *when* God will do it.

It's not *if* Christ will come again, it's a question of *when*.

It's not a question of *if* we will die, but *when*.

It's not a question of *if* we will receive eternal life, it's only a question of *when*.

Faith gives us confidence that God *will* keep God's promises,

that God *will* work miracles in our lives, & that God *will* make a way where there is no way.

We just don't know *when*.

So first, we need to have faith that God will show up.

Second, we need to keep close and cling to God.

When Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah spirit, Elijah responds,

"Yes, you can have it *if* you are with me *at the right time*."

Obviously, however, Elisha knew this already,

because three times Elijah says, "Elisha, you wait here while I go on".

And each time, Elisha responds, "No. I'm not leaving your side."

Elisha clings to Elijah like white on rice.

There's no way he's going to miss what he knows God will do.

And just like Elisha clings to Elijah, we must cling to God –

cling to God in prayer and Bible study, and in praise and worship.

So first, we need to have faith that God will show up.

Second, we need to keep close and cling to God.

And third, we need to want and seek and be open to a personal experience of God.

God showed up and worked a miracle for Moses – and it changed his life.

God showed up for Joshua and worked a miracle – and it changed his life.

God showed up for Elijah & Elisha and worked a miracle – and it changed their lives.

It's those personal experiences of God's signs and wonders and miracles
that are the stories of our faith – for Moses & Joshua & Elijah & Elisha & so, so, many more.
The Bible is nothing more than the story of God showing up in each of their lives
in a way that transformed them.

It's a story that is repeated time and time and time again throughout the entire Bible.

It's a story that has been repeated time and time and time again ever since Biblical times.

And it's a story that continues to be repeated in this time and this place –

God showing up in each of our lives in a way that transforms *us* – heart & mind & body & soul.

It's so life-transforming that it becomes the ground of our very being,
the purpose for our life, the foundation of our entire belief system.

It's so life-changing that we cannot help but share that experience with everyone we meet –
which brings me to the last point.

First, we need to have faith that God will show up.

Second, we need to keep close to God.

Third, we need to want and seek and be open to a personal experience of God.

And fourth and finally,

we must share the story of our own life transforming experience with others,

because that is the *only* way that the faith stays alive & gets passed on to the next generation.

It's exactly as Bishop Hazelwood writes in his blog:

“Most of what happens today in the US American church is secondary religion.

I've come to believe this is one of the reasons for the decline in participation in institutional religion....

We may live in a modern world filled with antibiotics, supersonic jets, and indoor plumbing,

but... people are hungry and starved for primary religious experience.

I wonder if our religion problem is that it's not religious enough.”

I totally agree with the Bishop.

People no longer need the church in order to hear an inspirational message or beautiful music,
or find community or opportunities to serve those in need.

All of those needs can be met outside of the church.

The only thing that the church has to offer that no other organization has,
is the invitation into a life-transforming encounter

with the God of boundless power and endless love,

the God who keeps promises, who makes a way where there is no way,

and who continues to perform signs and wonders and miracles every day.

Stand in faith that God will show up even if you don't know when.

Stick as close as you can to God, so that you'll be ready when the time comes.

Seek a personal experience of God.

And Share your story of that life-transforming experience.

My prayer for each and every one of you

is that you might have that life transforming experience of the living God

who has the power to perform miracles for people,

and who loves *you* enough to perform miracles for *you*. Amen

Thanks to the following authors who informed this sermon:

The Rev. Charles Hoffacker for his sermon, “Resurrection Threatens Death Every Day”

as found at this link: <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/old-testament-2-kings-21-14-resurrection-threatens-death-every-day/>

Dr. Mickey Anderson for his sermon, “Numb-Struck”

as found at this link: <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/old-testament-2-kings-2-1-12-numb-struck/>

Bishop James Hazelwood for his blog on February 2, 2024,

“Our Religion Problem: Maybe It's Due to a Lack of Religion”, found on Substack in The Notebooks of James Hazelwood