

“GOD IS SPEAKING”

2 Kings 2:1-12 Mark 9:2c-93 Feb. 11, 2017

Just as a nod to the upcoming holiday on Wednesday—yes, Valentine’s Day, this morning I will begin with kids’ definitions of *love* on Valentine’s day in Sunday School from Lowell Yoder, Holland, Ohio:

Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne, and they go out and smell each other. Herbert, Age 6

There are two kinds of love. Our love. God’s love.

But God makes both of them. Mary, Age 5

If you want to love better, you should start with a friend you hate. Jimmy, Age 7

As we began this sermon series titled “Rise Up” on Epiphany Sunday January 7, 2018, six weeks ago, we have moved from God is speaking to listen, move, answer and now back to God is Speaking (with a break in there for our Celebration 2017 on January 28th. Today in our scriptures we once again hear God speaking to us in the stories of Elijah caught up in the whirlwind and transfigured and the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top. We are poised on this mountain top as we peer into Ash Wednesday this week followed by the beginning of Lent and our journey toward the cross and Resurrection on Feb. 18th.

Rev. Dr. B. Kevin Smalls tells this story as we begin to look into the text of 2 Kings. He writes: “I will never forget my deep sadness when I placed my grandmother in hospice care after her doctor informed me that my grandmother was probably dying. I began to wonder if I wanted to be there when she breathed her last, or if I would prefer to come after her passing. I decided that I didn’t want to be there when she breathed her last breath. I didn’t think I could

handle it emotionally. It's one thing to watch someone walk out of the room, and it's another to come to the room, once the person has gone. When the nurse called me to inform me that my grandmother had passed, I was angry with the nurse for not calling me to tell me her time was near. Yet, I knew that was grief. I arrived and found that my grandmother had quietly slipped away from us.

Elisha made a different choice. He chose to be there the entire time. When given opportunities to turn away and pursue his own path, he decided to remain with his mentor, Elijah, even to the time of his earthly death. Elijah's impending death was not a secret. We read that the prophets were aware and even talked this over with Elisha (2:7) so he would be fully aware of what he was walking into. Elisha, like these fifty prophets, was aware of the dramatic conclusion centered around Elijah's death.

Then this issue appeared, again. Will Elisha stay the entire time, or will he leave early? Elisha remained faithful even when he was asked by Elijah, "What can I do for you before I leave?" Elisha requested a hard thing: a double portion of his spirit. The only way, however, to get it, was to somehow be around when he "is taken from him" (2:10).

Dr. Smalls relates his feelings about this relationship and the one he had with his grandmother. "There is something to be said of this type of relationship. I wasn't there with my grandmother when she left, but she's been there with me and ever since. Losing those who have led us is hard. It hurts. We'll never forget them. And through our own living, their lessons extended to us will continue to come to life with everyone we love beyond measure, touch in spite of resistance, and heal in spite of injury.

When I read Dr. Smalls' account of his choice not to be present when

his grandmother passed, I thought of the blessings I received being present when my mother breathed her last. The family had all gathered—my sister and brother, and grandchildren and me. We were standing around her bedside and her pastor had just finished his prayer with her. He said Amen and she let go with her last breath. He told us later that if he had a choice that is exactly how he would choose to leave this earth for the Heavenly Kingdom. I felt he had prayed her into heaven and it was such a peaceful letting go. I treasure that memory and it has helped me with my grieving then and in later years. That is probably why you have heard this story so many times as that memory continues to comfort me.

Most of you know that the last few months have been difficult for me personally as two close friends from my home church in Lakewood passed away and I was involved in their Celebration of Life services. As a pastor and in my own life I continue to learn about grief and mourning and how they are such individual processes. We each have our own way of dealing with the loss of a loved one and there is no right or wrong to it!! Some of us are comforted in one way and others are comforted in completely different ways. Judgment doesn't come into it because we each have to find our own ways through the valley of the shadow of death. As Christians we rely on God's presence, His love, and the promise of Eternal Life to get us thru and He does not abandon us in our time of need.

Elisha grieved deeply when he saw his mentor being taken up in glory. He ripped his clothes. But he also picked up the mantle to carry on. Black history calls all of us to pick up the mantle and continue the work that ancestors and leaders have begun to ensure freedom for all people. Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, Mary McLeod Bethune (all of whom were Methodists) were some who left us with a mantle. Also, the folks in our neighborhoods, schools,

communities who have helped us grow in wisdom and grace are worthy of our recall as we call people to remember the struggle for freedom. Youth and young adults also grieve the loss of grandparents and prominent figures who have passed away. Congregations long for those leaders they can't seem to replace and for those mentors from our church who live on in our memories as examples of lives lived with love and faithfulness. Even though we grieve the loss of these mentors, we acknowledge that we are called to pick up their mantles of faith and service.

The hope in this message is often found in our affirmation of faith, The Apostles' Creed, as we believe in the communion of saints. This communion comes alive in us as we do the work that has been left in our hands.

Now we move to the transfiguration story from Mark 9. It is a story we often try to explain. What happened on the mountain when Jesus went to pray with Peter, James, and John? Why did Jesus' clothing become dazzling white? How could Moses and Elijah be there when they lived so long ago? Was this a dream? How could all three disciples have the same dream? If you go to church, you hear this story every year on Transfiguration Sunday.

Is there room in our lives for visions we cannot explain? Have we closed our minds to truth that doesn't fit our rational categories? In her book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard shares stories of doctors who performed early cataract surgery in Europe. When a doctor removed bandages from one girl's eyes, she saw "the tree with the lights in it." Those words sent Dillard on her own journey: *"It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all, and I saw a tree with the*

lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured...I stood on the grass with lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance...The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it.” (Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, pp. 33-34)

We could give explanations for what happened to her. Or we could remember a time when we sensed the presence of the Holy in our own lives. Perhaps we’ve never told anybody about it—“It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance.”

Transfiguration literally means to change figure or form. Jesus’ appearance was changed. To his terrified disciples, Jesus must have looked like an angel. Some scholars say this is Mark’s resurrection story, the only resurrection picture we have in this Gospel because the risen Jesus doesn’t appear at the end of Mark’s story. But here on the mountain, Jesus appears in blazing light in a dream-like space talking with those who lived centuries before. Transfiguration Sunday marks an in-between space—between Epiphany, which began with the journey of the magi, and Lent, which begins Jesus’ journey to the cross. Some call this in-between state a *liminal* space, from a word meaning “threshold.” A *liminal* state is characterized by ambiguity and openness.

There’s often a sense of disorientation. Where am I? Perhaps you’ve had that sense after waking suddenly from a dream where you’ve been talking with loved ones who have died. Where am I? No wonder Peter didn’t know what to do! He wanted to build three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He wanted to hold this moment forever, to capture Jesus’ dazzling brightness, to make sure Moses and Elijah didn’t get away. But

before Peter could finish talking, a cloud overshadowed the disciples. They remembered stories from their ancestors—the cloud resting on the mountain as a sign of God’s presence in the wilderness. Then a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” As suddenly as the vision came, Moses and Elijah were gone and Jesus stood alone, looking as he had when these three fishermen saw him for the first time.

Was the sun shining at a certain angle on the mountain—like the sun turning office windows to gold at sunset? We can look at this story from several different angles. From one angle some claim that Jesus replaced Moses and Elijah. When the disciples looked up, the Old Testament heroes were gone and the disciples saw only Jesus. But look from a different angle: Moses and Elijah were confirming that Jesus was on the right path. Jesus didn’t replace them. He incarnated the mission of Moses the law-giver and Elijah, first of the prophets.

Transfiguration Sunday is here and now. What will you do with Jesus’ Epiphanies now that you are going into Lent? What will you do with God’s revelations once you realize where they lead? What will you do with “this is my beloved child” once you realize these are God’s words for you? This bold statement from heaven defines Lent. We are making that transition this Sunday. The transition from, “you are my child,” to “this is my child,” means that you share, along with Jesus, a move from chosenness and glory to heartache and rejection. To abuse and imprisonment. To injustice and death.

Once God says, “*this* is my daughter, *this* is my son,” a declarative that we get to overhear, this is no mere baptismal affirmation anymore, or at least one where you can rest on your blessings. No, it propels you into a life, a way of being, a new angle for this story, that manifests the Kingdom of God for

all to see. And when the Kingdom is visible, is palpable, you can be sure that forces perceiving it as a threat, as that which might usurp power, will be poised and ready to figure out how to extinguish its light.

Post-transfiguration life is not for the faint of heart. But we try to stay where we are. That's the safe option, after all. Same. Staid. Solid. I get it, especially when we see what we have known, on which we have relied, in whom we've believed all crumbling before our very eyes. Whether these disintegrating edifices are our churches, our denominations, our democracy-or our relationships, our communities, our country—too often our only options in response appear to be pop up tents, quick fixes, short-sighted vision statements, or nearsighted adaptations—none of which actually trust in a future that God holds.

This leads to another overlooked truth of the Transfiguration—that what we've seen so far is nothing compared to what's in store. The Transfiguration is no mere demonstration of God's glory, but that which insists God's glory will persist in the midst of and in spite of all that would point to the contrary.

The Transfiguration reveals the power of our present because of God's presence in Jesus, but it also points to the potential of our future. That's what Peter couldn't see. But, we can't blame him or think we could do better. Because we can't. We constantly and continually try to contain the present. And why? Because we believe, falsely, that the present is that which can be controlled and therefore, our futures as well. And so, our default decisions are likely dependent on the assumption that our lives will willingly bend to our momentary needs and contextual commitments.

This delusion, therefore, demands the claim of the Transfiguration in all its fullness and refuses to narrate this even in Jesus' life as just one more mira-

cle story. If the Transfiguration is to mean anything for our lives, it simply has to be that which intrudes on our present, changes our present, and contends that we hold a vision of our future in a different way—a Lenten way, a crucifixion way, a resurrection way. Because any revelation of Jesus' teaching, preaching, service to others, or, even presence, reveals our future and claims our future.

Are we ready to embrace a new future? Are we ready to have our future claimed by God? One that is not just inhabiting space or intent on constructing places that define and limit, that restrain and monitor, but a future where the grandeur of Moses and Elijah, the sheer grace of God's covenants with God's people explode our expectations? Can we all admit that a transfigured God demands a transfigured believer—and Lord, that's me?

A transfigured believer is one who insists that God's glory is not a self-individualized endeavor but needs to be experience by all. A transfigured believer is one who insists that those constrained by any form of short-sighted theologies be freed. And, a transfigured believer is one who knows that this is the divine moment that makes getting to the cross possible and crosses over into Lent holding that to heart. Is it me, Lord?