

“THE FRAGILE IMPERMANENT”

1 Kings 2:1-14; Mark 9:2-7

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I was a young minister working as a volunteer hospital chaplain the first time someone made an “official” confession to me. She was an elderly woman. She knew she was dying, and before she died, she had a secret of which she needed to unburden herself. In the intimacy of 3:00 a.m. darkness, she called me to her; together we recited the 23rd Psalm; and as I held her hand, she haltingly revealed a story she had carried alone for decades. I, in turn, formally pronounced the miracle of God’s forgiveness. Afterwards, we were silent. Though our hands were still joined, we did not speak; but I felt a sense of deep peace pervade the room. This was no ordinary comfort. This peace had substance; you breathed it in, could almost taste it, feel its weight in the room. I knew the woman in the bed felt it too. Though her breathing was still uneven, the lines of her face and body had relaxed. Blessed calm, I found myself thinking. If the presence of God is any one place more than anywhere else, it is here.

But as soon as the thought crossed my mind, I found myself questioning it. I am, after all, a highly-educated, rational, liberal Protestant. What is this really, my analytical mind queried. The substance of that presence still lingered, though more fragile; and in the theater of my head, I was tiptoeing around, trying to measure this experience, trying to determine its reality and solidity, poking gently from one angle or another, trying to gauge how much space it took up, experimenting whether it would disappear if I blinked my eyes or moved my body. And then it was gone, and I was left a little bereft, I guess... curious, wondering... I wonder about that moment still to this day.

I’ve thought about it several times this week because this morning’s scripture lessons are two of the most wonderful and extraordinary, and yet hard to fathom stories of all of scripture. First, the story of the transfer of prophetic authority from Elijah to his successor Elisha, where Elijah is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, and Elisha, picking up Elijah’s mantle, strikes the ground with it and parts the Jordan River—the validation of his new status. Then for our gospel reading, we have the story we call the Transfiguration where Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up to a mountaintop and the disciples suddenly see Jesus transformed, and Moses and Elijah there with him. These are big-time religious experiences, absolutely out of the ordinary manifestations of God’s presence and power, and we left-brain, rational, scientifically-grounded liberal protestants, most of us are not quite sure what to do with such stories: how to think about them, interpret them theologically, how to interpret ourselves in their context.

Now I’m going to go on a little side track here. Most of you know that we in this church preach usually, like many other liberal protestants, from the Revised Common Lectionary. I’ve often wondered who the “lectioneers” are, the folks who put together this schedule of readings. Even though I know it’s not realistic, I often picture them as a group of dour medieval-looking monks in brown homespun robes bent over their Bibles, picking out all of what they consider the “important” parts and divvying them up in a three-year cycle. I don’t often ascribe humor to the lectionary makers, but some sense of humor they must have, because this last Sunday before the beginning of Lent is always Transfiguration Sunday where the Transfiguration story comes to us paired with the Elijah/Elisha text. Beyond that, whenever the Transfiguration text comes up in the regular lectionary march through the gospels, it appears a second time per year, again almost always with the Elijah/Elisha story. This means that these stories, among the hardest in the Bible for us liberal protestants to get our hearts and hands and inquiring minds around, they are the most frequent texts we hear in church. More than Christmas, more than Easter. If that’s not a sense of humor, I don’t know what is!

So here we are, once again, planted by these texts squarely in the world of “unusual” religious experience

with which most of us are at least a little uncomfortable. How do we in our tradition deal faithfully with out of the ordinary religious experience? And by religious experience here I include everything from my pre-dawn palpable extraordinary sense of peace in a Duluth hospital room to visions to miracles to a sense of clear and precise direction from God. We don't talk about such things much in our tradition, but I am continually surprised that when someone is brave enough to broach the subject in conversation in a safe environment, there are always people, not always people I would have expected it of, people who are willing to share extraordinary manifestations of the holy in their lives. An alcoholic friend tells of an angel she saw repeatedly who encouraged her during the first rough days of her sobriety. A man in a former congregation, the most pedestrian bean-counting accountant you'd ever want to meet, shared with me that he'd seen a vision of the Risen Christ in a poor village church in Mexico and it changed his life. A physical therapist I met in Minnesota was once a Lutheran seminarian and one night God told him it was his call to heal with his hands, not with his mouth. That's a direct quote! And so he left seminary and entered physical therapy school. A retired school teacher on an elderhostel found herself in a field in England and would swear this field was a Holy place even though she can't say more about it than that, just it was holy. The stories go on and on: rich, varied, unasked for and unexpected. Encounters with the divine that do not fit neatly into rational categories of language and experience; encounters that, though fragile and impermanent, leave a mark on the encounterer's life and faith. So how do we think about them, we feet on the ground, not very mystical Congregationalists?

There are obviously problems with the world of religious experience. The first is verification. Not all that calls itself religious experience is from God. We know that. There are fakes and charlatans aplenty; there are delusions and mental illness. Sometimes the line between imagination and manifestation seems as thin as a whisper. It is prudent, I think, to be skeptical; but having said that, my guess is that most of us tend to err more on the side of being overly skeptical than being overly open or credulous. The world of God, the world of the holy is genuinely mysterious. That means that we can never, ever tame it to the cage of our reason. It will never fit the framework of research models or verifiable, repeatable truth. But that does not mean it is not real. It does not mean that the direct experiences some people have of the holy are all simply illusion and desire. Religious truth is always more complex than pure reason. Think about it. We Christians subscribe to a faith whose central image is a non-historical, non-verifiable assertion of resurrection. We should be familiar with spiritual complexity, even if we haven't personally encountered what we would call immediate religious experience.

Which brings us to the second problem with religious experience. On the one hand, out of the ordinary religious experience is universal in the sense that it exists across pretty much all religious traditions; it is un-universal in the sense that it's not distributed evenly across populations. Some of you sitting here are nodding as I talk about these ephemeral, hard to quantify but real moments of holy presence; others of you have to stretch to find something you can relate to that even remotely fits this category. And it doesn't have to do with how religious or faithful you are. Jonathan Edwards, the great 18th c. Puritan minister and theologian, yearned all his life for the kinds of religious experiences others around him had. He prayed; he fasted; he retreated; he did all he could to invite such an experience... and he was honest enough to confess it never happened for him—never—though he gave his whole life to God. So we know religious experience is not a marker of faith. Some of us, as the apostle Paul reminds us, have other gifts of the Spirit.

So what would it mean for us, when we come across accounts of un-usual religious experience, either in the scripture or in our lives, if we tried to open ourselves to it, to poke and test and try to analyze if we must, but to use those instances, at the very least, as a timely reminder that there is a great deal more to God than we can comprehend. Too often in our thinking, even in our prayers, we try to reduce the divine to that which we understand and can predict. We try to remake God in our image rather than pondering the mystery of what it means that we are made in God's. Maybe the good news of these texts for us today,

and all of the many days that they come round, is that, to quote Shakespeare, “there are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy”; and we, most of us, need to develop both the humility and the curiosity to live fully in the midst of mystery and uncertainty. Maybe even, hard as it is to believe, the brown-robed monks of my lectioneer imagination are right on the mark: this is exactly the message that our kind of Christians need to hear above all others because this is the part we have most trouble with. Thanks be to God. Amen.