

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena, Illinois
February 15, 2015
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Texts — Mark 9: 2-9 and 2 Kings 2: 1-12

In previous attempts at preaching this text, I fear that I have been unfair to Peter. To his reaction to the stunning sights he witnessed on the mountain top, that most spectacular revelation of all, where for just a brief instant, there was a glimpse of God, a glimmer of who Jesus really is. I have tended to think that Peter just didn't get it--was so overwhelmed that all he could do was fall back on a practical plan. Building three tents for Jesus and the two greatest of Old Testament figures who joined him there. To honor them, I guess. Or to prolong and preserve the dazzling moment. Or to avoid going back down the mountain. I've imagined him standing there gawking, mouth hanging open in stunned awe.

Well, there probably some gawking. Who wouldn't gawk when just a stone's throw from the likes of Moses and Elijah?

After spending much of this week studying Mark's terse version of this story, along with what precedes and follows the time on the mountain top, I've changed my mind. I believe that Peter knew exactly what was going on—and knowing was what caused him to suggest building those tents. This dramatic and mysterious—even supernatural event was chock full of images and symbols that connected it to those earlier stories of Moses and of Elijah finding God in the still small voice. The dazzling appearance of Jesus' clothes "whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them" as he prayed brought to mind Moses' face as he came down from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments from God. And there was the over shadowing cloud, an ancient sign for significant encounters between the human and the divine. Peter undoubtedly observed the holy days of Sukkot where huts or tents are built to commemorate the Exodus, the 40 years in the wilderness that God's deliverance from Egypt. So, all of these along with God's voice from the cloud, surely affirmed that this Jesus he was following was someone very special.

But this knowing raised some other questions. So, I find myself drawn to the beginning of a trilogy—today and the next two Sundays as Mark continues on this theme. Today, more of the story of Elijah from reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning. Next Sunday, leaving the mountaintop and reflecting more on the meaning of Elijah's presence in this turning-point story. And in two weeks, the big question. How does this brilliance of God's glory, the transfiguration square with Jesus' message to the disciples about how he will need to suffer, die, and be raised?

And so, to the ancient story from 2 Kings. As we recall, Elijah was called by God to be a prophet to the people. He was not universally loved, though, for his message was often harsh, his purpose to bring the people back to faithfulness to Yahweh. He was feared by those who had fallen away to worship other gods. But, still, he was a major figure—possibly the greatest of all the prophets. He carried forth God's word. He lived out his call (sometimes reluctantly), even when his own life was at risk. One of the things God called him to do when he was sulking in despair on Mt. Horeb was to anoint another prophet to take his place. When he gathered up his strength, he set out to do God's will and encountered young Elisha who was going about his farming tasks, plowing the field with his oxen. Without a word, Elijah approached him and tossed his mantle—or cloak—over Elisha's shoulders. Elisha immediately assented to follow this wild-looking stranger, asking only to kiss his parents goodbye and to sacrifice the tools of his trade. It was unequivocal. Elisha turned his face toward the new calling and without hesitation walked away from the life he had known and set out to accompany Elijah through whatever adventures awaited them.

In our reading today, Elijah is at the end of his life. Elisha has been faithful and now commits himself to remain with Elijah until the very end. At this point, a number of those characteristic miracles/supernatural events take place. And we need to be careful not to allow them to get in the way of the enduring message here. Sometimes, we dismiss such stories because they seem so impossible and implausible that they couldn't possibly have any meaning for us! But remember that the supernatural events are often linked with other dramatic stories that are important to a peoples' identity. In this case, the parallels are with the Exodus story—partings of the water like Moses with the Red Sea and the passing of the Israelites through the Jordan River to the Promised Land. Moses used a staff to part the waters, Elijah used his rolled up mantle. There are similarities between their successors — Joshua who succeeds Moses, Elisha succeeds Elijah. All of these things are the stuff of heroic deeds that go down in the lasting heritage of a people.

Elisha clearly knows his role and the significance of that mantle that was thrown so casually over his shoulders. He asks but one thing of Elijah—that he be given a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Now, this is a reference to the inheritance laws and practices of that time. The eldest son, the first born, automatically received a double portion of his father's estate—twice as much as the other heirs. So, if there were two sons, the eldest would get 2/3 and the youngest, 1/3. (Sorry, but in those days, the women—wives and daughters—were out of luck!) Perhaps Elisha is requesting here to be named as Elijah's primary successor. But he is also probably saying, "This is not going to be easy. Your shoes will be hard ones to fill. But I am ready and willing to carry on. Just give me a double share of your spirit. That will give me the strength I need to go forward." Elijah's answer is interesting, "It is not mine to give." By adding another supernatural dimension—a sort of test in which Elisha must see him being taken up in the whirlwind, Elijah is turning it over to God. "The spirit is not my doing, it is

given by God," he might have said, "Now God will see to your spirit." And, so it happens. It also happens that the other people watching from afar, see Elisha's return, his using Elijah's mantle to part the waters again, and they know that the spirit is with Elisha. But they do an odd thing. They bow to Elisha, accepting him, acknowledging him as successor, but still insist on sending a search party to see if they can find any trace of Elijah. Maybe they just want to make sure he has a permanent resting place, a grave that can be honored. But maybe they are not quite sure, themselves, that anyone can really replace Elijah. Maybe they are harboring a hope that they will find him and convince him to come back! But Elijah has vanished and it is now Elisha's turn.

Back to today—this time and this place. We have recently had our annual meeting and our elections. Our senior warden, who served his two year term—nine years altogether—has moved on as others have before him. We have a new senior warden, junior warden and vestry members. The leadership of the church has shifted. And undoubtedly, there will be some new and different ideas on the table. Which is a good thing! As positive as things may be in our life together—and it is positive—we cannot rest on our laurels and stay where we are. It is a new day for Grace and, indeed, for all churches, our new leaders have picked up the mantle—the stories, traditions, and visions that they have received and must carry, while also finding new ways to use them to enliven and strengthen us, knowing that it is natural in human life to move on even while honoring what has gone before.

The broad and enduring message in our readings today are about vocation and call. (Such are not reserved for ordained clergy! Each and everyone of us is called to ministry!) Elisha is portrayed as unquestioning, unhesitant—maybe not unafraid of following in Elijah's footsteps but certainly prepared to do his best with God's help. Here, at Grace, many of you have taken the mantle onto your shoulders. And, we expect that even more will continue to do so in the days and weeks and years ahead.

Leadership change at Grace Church doesn't come with dramatic miracles like the parting of the water or clothes glowing in the dark. No, our transformations, transfigurations tend to be gradual. Maybe we don't even notice them for a while or until we look back. Or maybe they take a circular or spiral path instead of going straight ahead. But let us be clear that as things change, our God is still here, still with us, still calling us to discipleship. Never promising that discipleship is easy. It has a price—a trust in God, the willingness to leap out into the unknown, not looking only back to what was but also forward to what can be. Trust that with God's help, we can answer that call, be given a double portion of the spirit that will nourish and strengthen us for the journey. And trust that, no matter what, God will be present and calling. May we recognize the spirit in all who answer.

Amen.