

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

Year B

February 19, 2012

2 Kings 2:1-12

Mark 9:2-9

Pastor David Tryggestad

Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church

Duluth, Minnesota

I wonder if the single most significant threat to a successful marriage might be unrealistic expectations.

Likewise, I wonder if the most significant threat to faithful discipleship might also be unrealistic expectations.

In the past eight days I have had the privilege to sit down with two couples planning weddings this year. One of the things we talk about is marriage expectations. To help us enter into that conversation, I have some required reading. One of the pieces is an article written by our own Sam Cook, who writes regular columns for the *Duluth News Tribune*. He talks about a day in the life of his marriage with long-time wife Phyllis. It's hardly glamorous. The day includes such mundane things as household chores, cooking dinner, taking out the garbage, cleaning up after the dog, etc.

There are hardly two more spectacular stories from the Bible than our First Lesson and our gospel for today. You might say they are fantastic, that they are *incredible*, in the literal sense of the word—hardly credible, unbelievable, beyond imagination.

Think back to your Sunday School days, if you had them. What images stick in your memory from pictorial depictions of Old Testament stories? I still remember a color poster of the old man Elijah, long white beard and flowing robe, being taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. Fantastic! Incredible!

And then there is Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, his clothing blazing more radiant than the sun. The veil of his human flesh has been lifted and the disciples, Peter, James, and John, see him in his divine, heavenly glory. Peter wants to stay there. He offers to build dwellings—shrines—so that the glory might be retained. Our gospel writer, Mark, in a rare stroke of generosity towards Peter, excuses his outburst, saying that he was so frightened, he didn't know what to say.

I'd like to go back to the fantastic, the *incredible* character of our two stories for today, incredible in the sense of hardly credible, unbelievable, beyond imagination.

If you were to seriously engage a religious skeptic about the reliability of the faith, of the veracity, the credibility, of the Bible, where might you begin? What stories might you tell? I suspect the stories of Elijah taken into heaven in a chariot of fire and Jesus on the

Mount of Transfiguration might be *way* down your list, perhaps a *long* way on your list, perhaps not on your list at all!

I had breakfast with a pastoral colleague yesterday morning who talked about his ambition to pull together a collection of sermons from his almost 40 years in parish ministry, a collection of sermons on difficult texts; he indicated that the readings for today would be among them.

If our stories for this morning are difficult, if they are not first on your list of stories to seriously engage a religious skeptic about the reliability of the faith, of the veracity, the credibility, of the Bible, what can we make of them in a brief sermon?

Let's look at the characters who are *with* our biblical heroes. Let's first look at the story of Elijah being taken into heaven in a chariot of fire. Let's look at Elijah's protégé, Elisha. Here the fantastic quality of the story gives way to the *human*, to the deep emotional connection between two men, the younger of whom calls his mentor, "Father, Father!" When Elijah disappears from sight, Elisha mourns in grief, tearing his clothing. Then he picks up the mantle that has fallen from Elijah, the mantle of authority, the mantle of Elijah's spirit, and goes out to carry on the work of the older, departed prophet. As the story goes on, we see Elijah, the old departed prophet, in the work of his younger protégé, Elisha.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, we see two sets of characters: on the one hand, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, and, on the other, the disciples Peter, James, and John. If the contrast between the great prophet Elijah and his young protégé, Elisha, is great in our First Lesson, the contrast between the two sets of trio figures in our gospel is unimaginable. Jesus, transfigured in his heavenly glory, standing and talking with two of the most significant personalities in the Old Testament, both gone for hundreds of years, on the one hand, and three terrified disciples, Peter, James, and John, on the other. I imagine the scene from the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, when the scarecrow, the tin man, and the cowardly lion stand trembling before the image of the "Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz," except that there is no element of comedy in our gospel.

Again, let's consider the characters *with* Jesus, but *not* Moses or Elijah, as they disappear as suddenly as they appear. Let's consider those three terrified disciples. As I indicated, our gospel writer Mark is uncharacteristically charitable towards Peter in this story, excusing his outburst as coming from his great fear. Throughout the rest of Mark's narrative, however, we see Jesus' disciples in all their humanness: afraid, disbelieving, slow to understand, quarreling, and finally abandoning their Lord.

Yet it is these very same human disciples, with all their faults, with all their shortcomings, whom Jesus takes with him down the mountain into the valley where ministry happens. It is a ministry of servanthood in ordinary, everyday life.

More than that, it is a story of *relationship*. Elisha calls out to his mentor, Elijah, as he is being taken from him, "Father, Father!" Jesus shows his disciples the very heart of God,

of the One he calls “Father,” the One who called Jesus “Beloved,” and Jesus invites his disciples—and all of us—to call upon God in the same very personal, endearing way.

Perhaps the truth about our two fantastic, incredible stories today is not so much the historical veracity of the details of the story, but rather what happens *after* our two stories—the rest of the story—regarding the other characters in our story. Elisha, beloved by his old mentor Elijah, carries on the mission and ministry of Elijah, under the mantel of Elijah, a double portion of the spirit of Elijah. It is as if Elijah is still present in the work of his young protégé, Elisha.

The disciples descend the mountain with Jesus and they carry on the mission and ministry of their mentor, their Lord, Jesus. And perhaps, when the disciples again ascend to higher ground with their Lord, this time with their Lord taken up into heaven in a cloud, as he disappears from their sight, they might remember—at least Peter, James, and John might remember—the Mount of Transfiguration, when, as much as they wished to remain, their ministry called them to their everyday life in the valley, with the promised Holy Spirit guiding and empowering them.

Sam Cook reminds us of the ordinary, everyday character of marriage, and that it is in and through the ordinary, everyday details and events that the blessings of marriage are experienced. We might add that it is also in the ordinary, everyday struggles and heartaches of life that blessing and joy is to be found in relationship with one another. Our biblical stories today remind us that it is the ordinary, everyday character of discipleship that the blessings of faith are experienced, that the Spirit of God goes with us, empowering us, transforming us, transfiguring us.

Thanks be to God!