TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Look! Listen!* 2 Kings 2:1-14

Mark 92-9

**Today is the final Sunday after Epiphany** the sacred season in which God is revealed in the world, when God’s glory is made tangible and real. It is also called *Transfiguration Sunday* because it is also the Sunday we hear the story of how the disciples suddenly saw Jesus in a new light.

This should not be too much of a surprise because the most obvious physical quality associated with God’s presence is light—*holy light.* In the past couple of months, we have watched as the light has come upon us, changing in its flow and movement as the light moved among us.

Writer and historian Diana Butler Bass describes it in this way:

[God’s sacred] *story moves from flickering candlelight, to the light of the cradle, to seekers welcomed into the widening circle of light.*

*And now the mood of the lectionary is changing. Mists are gathering. We’re moving toward Lent.*

The tradition on this last Sunday of Epiphany is to remember the Transfiguration—that story of mountaintops and visions of exalted persons of the past, and of Jesus.

Yet, instead of Jesus, we began by hearing the story of the prophet Elijah’s last moments on earth before he was swept up into heaven. It is important to note that his last moment on earth was *not* his death. It was his *removal* to another plane. We do not know where he went.

This is important note because it means that he could still return. Indeed, during the celebratory feast at Passover, many Jewish families leave an empty chair at the table in case Elijah should return.

I wanted us to listen to Elijah’s last story along with the story of Jesus’ transfiguration because both not only tell us a great deal about Elijah and Jesus, but they also tell us a great deal about ourselves—a great deal that we can learn from and celebrate. There is a great deal from which we may draw inspiration for our own faith journeys, and both stories also challenge us as we continue the journey.

At the end of the short commentary by Diana Butler Bass (which I quoted earlier), she observes that the Transfiguration is *“a pivotal occasion in Jesus’ life that St. Thomas Aquinas deemed to be the greatest of all of his miracles.”* And then she asks: *“But what was the real miracle?”*

Beginning with Elijah and Elisha’s story, one of the elements of the story that most Jewish people will notice is that Elijah’s last journey takes him from Gilgal to Bethel, from Bethel to Jerico, and from Jerico to the far bank of the Jordan River.

As fifty men from Jerico’s guild of prophets watch, Elijah parts the river’s waters in two, and he and Elisha cross over to the opposite side where Elijah is swept up into heaven in a chariot of fire. The significance of this story is at least threefold.

First, Elijah led Elisha in a reverse route that the first Israelites took as they entered the Promised Land. Fresh off the forty-year sojourn out of Egypt, the people were led by Joshua who also parted the waters so that the people could cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan.

Second, Elisha knows that his master is going to leave him. In fact, *everyone* seems to know that Elijah is going to be taken away from them. Thus, each time and in each town they stop in, the other prophets come up to Elisha and say: *‘Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?’* [v. 2:3c, 5c]

Third, each time and in each town they stop in, Elijah tries to get the younger man to wait as he goes on ahead. Elisha, however, refuses to let him out of his sight. Stubbornly, Elisha says he will stay with Elijah, and they go on.

At the last stop, as Elisha watches his master rising up in a whirlwind into the chariot of fire, he calls out to him. He calls out “father.” His call is distressed, as if he would bring him back, if he could. Unfortunately for him, Elijah does not, or cannot respond. And soon, Elisha finds himself alone beside the river.

What I find impressive about this story is that Elisha does not spend any more time there on the banks of the Jordan. As he picks up Elijah’s mantel, he realizes that he has been given the inheritance he asked for: the same sacred prophetic power as Elijah. And so, just as the master before him had done, Elisha roles up the mantel, strikes the surface of the water, and crosses over.

Elisha has come to terms with two things. First, that his master is now beyond his reach in this life. Second, and more importantly, he knows that the responsibility now rests with him. He also knows, and must accept, that his time as Elijah’s disciple and protégé means that he has been made ready to serve. And so, he does not hesitate. He continues on his way.

We see something of the same action among the disciples Jesus has led up the mountain with him in the Gospel of Mark. He will still be with them when the incident concludes, and they leave the mountain. However, unlike Elisha, Jesus’ disciples do not seem to know what is going on. Jesus has not told them what is going to happen on the mountain. For all they know, they are all just out for a stroll. Therefore, Peter, James, and John are caught completely unaware when things begin to happen. Indeed, they are speechless…except for Peter.

Think about it: one moment they are catching their breath and turning to appreciate the view from the mountaintop. In the very next moment, Jesus seems to glow from within as if all of the light of the sun and stars is shining from within him. He does not look like himself. Yet he does not look like anyone other than himself—a *new* self the disciples have not seen before. What is more, he is not alone. The most revered men from the faith—Moses and Elijah—are beside him.

A terrified (they are *all* terrified) Peter, ever impetuous and casting about for something to say, blurts out: *‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’* [v. 9:5]

Finally, a cloud descends and hides all of this from them, and they hear a voice saying to them: *“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”* [v. 7]

What I want to highlight in both of these stories are the challenges present to the human beings involved. Whether it is the story of Elisha, or Peter, James, and John on a mountain hike with Jesus, all of these men experience loss and fear.

Elisha experiences the very real loss of the master he has come to regard as his father. We can qualify their relationship by saying that Elijah was his *spiritual* father, but that does not negate the trust and confidence the younger man had come to have in his elder. His sense of confidence and loss had to have been great. Moreover, Elisha knows that his own time has come to lead and that he will have to assume the duties of prophet and leader without the physical/tangible counsel of his teacher—such a great weight had come to him!

As for Peter, James and John, it is fortunate for them that Peter’s dominant personality trait seems to have been impetuousness. If it were not for his spontaneity and brashness James and John might have thought they were hallucinating and may not have had the presence of Moses and Elijah confirmed for them.

Good thing Peter was there to break into the private conversation Jesus was having with them! Even terrified and nervous, Peter found a way to inject his presence into the tȇte-à-tȇte between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

What is a blessing—what is modeled for us in Peter’s impetuousness—is that despite his terror, he is determined to serve. Indeed, his bold action shows his determined desire to have a part in this beautiful moment despite his, and the others’ feelings of terror.

And that is the lesson of both of the stories we heard this morning: that our journey with God will always be glorious and meaningful. However, it is rarely going to be comfortable or without some degree of confusion and even fear. What we learn is that despite their very real and understandable feelings, none of these disciples let that keep them from continuing on.

With Peter, James, and John especially, we learn that, having seen Jesus in a new light, their response is to serve and to follow. Their response to be faithful to the love of God they have been shown, and which they have made their own.

In the following weeks, starting with Ash Wednesday, we will explore what this season of discovery has shown us. We will travel with Jesus on his way to the cross, and we will also sing the songs of the Bible that speak of all of the emotions—the fears, the hopes, the joy and the sorrow—of human living, striving, disappointment and achievement. Through all of this we will have been prepared by what we have come to know about Jesus throughout Epiphany. Because of the light that we have been shown, our promise is that we will not be lost or abandoned. The love of God will continue on in our lives and in our faith.

Now, I usually have an example to share with you to demonstrate what I have be talking about. I do have one, but this is not the usual story. It is, however, timely, and real. It is about the experience of a young Palestinian man who spoke at Church of the Crossroads this past Friday evening. His name is Adam and he is Muslem and grew up in a village called Wadi Forqin, which is just a few miles from Bethlehem.

Adam was here in this country to raise funds for a new project in his community that was going to help his people by bringing in new jobs. The completed project—in partnership with the United Methodist Church in this country—was also going to be a place of learning and building, of fellowship and new life.

In a place where illegal Israeli settlements have been encroaching on the land—confiscating more and more of it, all illegally, he and the people of his village were continuing to move forward. They continued to claim the right to be on the land their families have lived on for many generations.

Last October, just as Adam had finished visiting a variety of UMC congregations to talk about the new project and raise funds, he returned to California to rest before continuing his travels and going home.

Then October 7 happened. Needless to say, he was not able to return home. It is unclear when he will be able to return to Wadi Forqin, or even if it would still be there. He is, for the moment, stranded here in this country.

Adam, of course, fears for his family and community, but rather than succumb to that fear Adam and a retired Methodist minister, have embarked on another tour of visits and talks. Only now, the subject is his home and the lives of ordinary, non-combative people in his hometown. He speaks of their life before and after October 7.

One of the most important things I heard him talk about was about the *Nakba.* In Arabic, *nakba* means “catastrophe” and it what the Palestinian people call the purge of Palestinians from their homes in 1948. *Nakba.* More than 700,000 thousand Palestinian people were expelled from their home after the Partition Plan for Palestine was instituted.

That was 76 years ago. While many of us think of such things as being in the past, Adam says that for he and his people it as an on-going experience.

As the Israeli government and people continue to grow more and more conservative and less and less willing to entertain a two-state solution; as more of the land Adam’s family’s owned, and the land of others’ families—land they have farmed for generations—are confiscated to build more illegal settlements; as more walls are built, and the lines grow longer at check-points that keep them from taking their children to hospitals and their produce to market to earn a living—as all of this continues to happen all around them the Palestinian people continue as best they can.

They continue to build—even when their homes are bulldozed and their olive trees are uprooted and torn up. They go back to their land and they build again.

I tell you this story because it is our story, too, as are all stories of human suffering and human striving. This is the story of one man, one village who happen to be Palestinian. There are many more stories like it of other people in other places. And we need to hear them—not only so that we may have sympathy or even righteous anger for the injustice and suffering for another.

We need to hear such stories because Jesus’ transfiguration—this amazing calling of attention to his person—this is what it means for us. You see, Jesus was not changed in that moment of startling brightness. He only *looked* different so that we would notice. He was changed on the *outside* so that Peter, and you and I would notice and remember and be changed on the *inside*. Jesus’ transfiguration does not change who he is. However, it gives those who see the changed visage a new understanding of him because we have seen him in a different light.

We have seen him in the light of God so that we might see him in the suffering of others, and in our response to it. We have seen him in the light of God so that we might follow—even when we are frightened and confused (perhaps *especially* when we are frightened and confused). We have seen him in the love of God so that we may see others in that same light—others who are also the sons and daughters of God.

As we turn our path toward Lent, I pray we will remember the light of Epiphany and the light that shone from Jesus on that mountaintop. I pray we will also see each other and all others in that same light, because it is nothing less that the love of God that is shining in our midst. Let this be so. Amen.