

“Tis Good, Lord, to Be Yours”

Transfiguration, Series B

2 Kings 2:1-12

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. ³ The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." ⁴ Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."

So they came to Jericho. ⁵ The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." ⁶ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. ⁷ Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.

⁸ Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. ⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." ¹⁰ He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."

¹¹ As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹² Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

2 Corinthians 4:1-10

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Mark 9:2-9

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

We have white on the altar today and music that marks this as a “high feast day,” although it seems to be our own, little secret. Have you ever seen a food section of the newspaper with special Transfiguration recipes? Ads for “Transfiguration Day Sales” at the mall? Nowhere, so far as I know, can you purchase little Moses and Elijah action figures, to go with three sleeping disciple figures, a Jesus in a pure, white costume, and maybe a spray can of instant “cloud ” to complete the scene.

Unlike Christmas and Easter, we don’t share this day with Wal-Mart. It’s just ours, this scene up on the mountain where Mark takes us today, along with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, and Peter, James, and John. From up here we can look back to the peaks of Christmas, Epiphany, and the Baptism of Jesus, where we heard the word spoken to Jesus, “You are my Son.” We can see also in the other direction, toward Jerusalem, and Mount Calvary, where another voice will make proclamation about Jesus. This next time, though, it will be the Roman centurion who speaks, and Jesus will be dead. Today, however, we can see for a moment beyond even that mountain, to the peaks of the resurrection.

It’s a mysterious scene we enter today. What could it mean to observe these ancient figures talking with Jesus? And what did they have to talk about? Mark doesn’t tell us, so we have to guess, but a pretty good guess would be that they were telling stories about their lives and careers. Both had been prophets. Both had confronted powerful, nasty kings with nothing more than words. Both, despite being remembered among Israel’s great ones, had been treated shabbily by the people.

Both had also found themselves taken away, their lives ended, before they reached the goals to which their lives seemed pointed. Moses had worked so hard, struggling with Pharaoh, with the murmuring wilderness generation, and also with God. He got through the wilderness, to the mountain from which he could see the promised land in the distance. But he got no further. There God took him.

Elijah had also been to the mountain, just before the story we heard in today's first lesson. Elijah's calling was to turn the hearts of Israel back to God. But he'd become so weary over apparent failure that he'd gone to the holy mountain and tendered his resignation. "I'm the last faithful person left, God. And I quit."

And God said, "Well, Elijah, you're wrong, mostly. You're not the last believer, and you're not near as good a listener as you might be when it comes to knowing where I am and what I'm doing. But I accept your resignation. Go, cast your mantle on Elisha, your successor." And then, as we heard today, God took him. Which wasn't exactly how Elijah had planned this scene. His threat to retire was supposed to get God to give him a little extra help or recognition, or some such thing. But God simply accepted his words at face value. Elijah was finished.

That could easily be a picture of most of our lives. We work and work, believing always that soon will come the day when things will fall into place. The struggle will finally be over. When I finish school, get a job, get married, recover from this divorce. When my children are grown, when the loans are paid off. When I retire. Tomorrow. Next year. And sometimes we do make it to a mountaintop. Things do fall into place and make sense, we glimpse the promised land, for a while at least, but always we stumble into another valley beyond. Somehow we never seem to finish, and then God takes us.

I seem surrounded these days by friends who stand on this mountain, looking at the promised land and knowing they won't be going much further—friends with cancer, with new forms of upheaval and loss and heartache, who realistically fear what's lurking just over the horizon. And it leaves me in fear that I may be next. It's all too easy to know Moses' and Elijah's disappointment. And it's easy to let our fears race around in our minds and take over our lives

Mark's gospel invites us to join that little group on the Mount of Transfiguration, to pause for a moment and ponder what really matters in life.

As soon as we complete the 10:45 worship service this morning I'll hurry back to Valparaiso, where I'll preach this afternoon at the funeral of a colleague who died suddenly a few days ago. And if you have to have a funeral, Transfiguration might be the perfect day for it.

My friend and colleague David died on a mountaintop, sort of. Actually, he died on a cruise ship, where he and his wife Phyllis were celebrating 45 years of marriage and retirement from their positions at the university. They were fortunate enough to have the ship's captain preside over a renewal of their wedding vows somewhere in the Caribbean. Afterward they had a lovely dinner and delightful evening of storytelling and laughter with two friends who accompanied them.

Around 4:30 next morning, Dave woke Phyllis to say he was having trouble breathing. She called the ship's medical team, who arrive quickly to find Dave in cardiac arrest. They worked heroically, but they could not re-start David's heart.

So Phyllis arrived back in Valparaiso alone. When it was finally determined that the funeral would be on Transfiguration Sunday, she recalled a story about Transfiguration Sunday 46 years ago. They were living in Oklahoma, David serving in campus ministry and Phyllis working for student services at the same university, and they got engaged on Valentine's Day which that year happened to also be Transfiguration. One of the hymns that day was the one we'll sing in a moment as our Hymn of the Day, "How Good, Lord, to Be Here," which in older hymnals was "'Tis Good, Lord, to Be Here." But by chance there was a typo in the bulletin. The last "e" in the title became an "s," and the hymn was listed as,

“’Tis Good, Lord, to Be Hers.” Nothing Dave said could make anyone believe this was really an accident, and not a clever celebration of the new reality in their lives.

When we sing that hymn in a few moments, I invite you to think of it that way, maybe even sing it, not as “here,” but as “hers,” or “his,” but also as “yours.” Here’s why . . .

We don’t get to choose how long we will live, or how much we will get done. But to some degree, we do get to choose the company we keep and with whom we will live, and in whose loving embrace we will die. These are the greatest gifts God gives us, the people in our lives who love us, and those we are privileged to love and with whom we get to share our brief arc through space and time. It *is* good, Lord, to be his, and hers, and yours (that is, you, this community).

But also, how good, Lord, to be *yours*! What a blessing to know that no matter where we are or what we’ve done with our lives, and whether our communities and families have held together or become lost to each other, the same voice that spoke to Jesus at his baptism, and again on the mountain of Transfiguration, says to each of you, every day, “You are my child, my beloved, in whom my soul delights. I am yours and you are mine.”

We never go anywhere alone, even to our own crucifixion wherever and however it comes. That voice that tells us who and whose we are follows us everywhere in the person of the crucified Christ, today in the flesh and blood of this community, his body—his arms and hands and feet and face and voice.

On Wednesday, we will hear again the sobering words, “Dust you are. And to dust you shall return.” As if we might forget! But the dust and ashes on our faces will be in the shape of our Lord’s cross, and that’s the pattern of our lives. His story is our story, and our story is his.

There is a specific time to tell the Transfiguration piece of the story. Jesus told his disciples not to speak of it to anyone ‘til the son of Man is raised from the dead. So we’ll save this story ‘til then. Which means that one day, when that same young man in white clothes at Jesus’ tomb greets the mourners who come to visit our graves, he will say, “He’s not here in this grave. She is risen, gone to be with her Lord! And probably by now telling stories with Moses and Elijah and a host of others, stories about mountaintops and cruise ships and manna in the wilderness of Indiana. . .”

So, down from the mountain we go after today, into the wilderness, into a world full of people who, like us, desperately need Jesus’ assistance and healing. And at the cost of his life, finally, he gives them what he can, and what they need—himself. And we do the same, in his name, as his body in the world. We’ll give ourselves away. It will cost us everything, as it did Jesus.

All along the way, and at the end of the journey, we’ll sing the same thing: “How good, Lord, to be here, and how good, Lord, to be his, and hers, and yours. Now and forever.”