

# Sermon: Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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Year B  
2 Kings 2:1-12  
Psalm 50:1-6  
2 Corinthians 4:3-6  
Mark 9:2-9

When my daughter was seven... or eight... we went to Disney World... and one of the first rides she wanted to go on was Space Mountain... so we checked to make sure that she was tall enough... got in line... in a long line... and waited a long time as we curved back and forth through the cue... she made excited comments... and since I had been on before... asked questions about what it was like... the anticipation was palpable... and when it was our time to get into the rocket ship... just as she was ready to straddle the precipice of assured parental safety and unknown danger... she changed her mind... the unknown was too much for her... she didn't want to go... she was too frightened... just like the disciples were... on Mt. Tabor...

Today's readings talk to us about prophecy... about thin places... about God's presence... and the tension between wanting to be grown up... but not always feeling ready for it...

The story about Elijah and Elisha traveling from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho and to the Jordan... tells us about the smooth transition of authority from one prophet to another... Elisha's refusal to remain behind shows his allegiance to Elijah and to the prophetic tradition...

One translation of this text [The Jewish Study Bible] calls the "*company of prophets*" the "*disciples of the prophets*"... these disciples were not necessarily prophets themselves... but were radical monotheists who followed the teachings of prophets like Elijah... but the text says that they tell Elisha... the one they know will be the new prophetic leader... that his master is going to be taken... although they don't use words

to indicate death... Elisha knows this... but he may either be in some denial about it... or he doesn't feel quite ready for leadership... to be grown up...

And when Elisha requests a double share of Elijah's spirit... he isn't requesting twice as much as Elijah had... but he is requesting more than the other prophetic heirs might receive... because according to Mosaic law... the firstborn son was entitled to receive a double portion of the inheritance... and in 1Kings 19:16... God had already instructed Elijah to anoint Elisha as his heir... but Elijah doesn't want to second guess God... and so he leaves the final decision to God... that's why Elijah says "It will be granted if you see me as I'm being taken from you."

This story about Elijah is a Moses story... when Elijah strikes the Jordan river with his mantle and the water parts... we're reminded of Moses... and the place where they cross the Jordan... east of Jericho... is near Mt. Nebo... where Moses had died... and the chariot and horses of fire... and the cloud in Mark's Gospel remind us of Moses... and the fire and the cloud which led the Israelites in the desert... and although Deuteronomy 34:5 recounts that Moses died... the historian Josephus gives an indication that some Jews in Mark's time believed that Moses was taken... like Elijah... directly into heaven...

Elijah's heavenly assumption became the stuff of legends in Judaism... and fostered traditions about him in prophetic circles... they suggest that Elijah periodically returns to earth... and associate him with the return of the Messiah...

Ps. 50 continues the lectionary's prophetic theme... it's the first psalm of an Asaphite collection... the Asaphites were Levites who served as Temple singers in the Second Temple... and 2 Chronicles 29 refers to "Asaph the seer"... suggesting that the poetry written by this tribe was divinely inspired... this collection of Psalms also compares the relation between God and Israel to the one between a shepherd and his flock... to leaders and followers... but today's Psalm summons the congregation of the faithful... and it summons us...

In 2 Corinthians... Paul says that *the god of this world*... division and accusation... has blinded the minds of unbelievers from seeing the light of the Gospel... has blinded them from seeing the light described in today's Gospel which now shines forth from Christ... and which reveals him as the Son of God...

And we can glimpse a touch of this light at conferences... workshops... or retreats... they can be mountaintop experiences... we're in a community with people who are like us... people who are interested in improving what they do... ideas fly around... we're transported... inspired... excited... and then we come down off that mountain... confident we can change the world... but God's possibilities are often replaced with the world's realities... though... if we come down with one good idea that we can put into practice... we can be satisfied that the conference was worthwhile...

But it's God who facilitates these mountaintop experiences... Jesus led Peter, James, and John up the mountain... to a thin place... where apocalyptic figures... along with the voice from the cloud... affirmed Jesus' identity and purpose...

In Exodus 33:18 Moses said to God... "Show me your glory." And God said... "I will make all my goodness pass before you... but you cannot see my face... for no one shall see me and live. I will put you in a cleft of the rock... and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by... then I will take away my hand... and you shall see my back... but my face shall not be seen."

And in 1Kings: God said to Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain, for I am about to pass by." And God was not in the wind that split mountains... or in the earthquake... or in the fire which Elijah saw... but God was in the sound of the sheer silence... and when Elijah heard it, *he wrapped his face in his mantle*... and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave...

Today's readings talk to us about thin places, the presence of God, and the tension between wanting to grow up and not always feeling ready for it. Sometimes we hide the

truth from ourselves... sometimes the truth is too overpowering and we're terrified... and so we ask people like Moses to veil their face so we don't have to face the truth... or we make things cloudy so we don't have to face God and God's truth... and sometimes we distract ourselves with other projects... sometimes we wait in line for Space Mountain... but aren't always ready to get on...

Epiphany has been about showing Jesus as the manifestation of God... and although Jesus is directly connected to the Godhead... he didn't take God's omnipotence so he could overpower the world... but he engaged... personally in the suffering of the world... God's participation is suffering... and I think that when we approach the burning bush... or the whirlwind... or like the disciples did... the Transfigured Jesus... we stand naked before God... and become painfully aware of how much we magnify our small good deeds and turn them into mountains... and how we shrink our many sins and turn them into pebbles...

And as we prepare for a faith-deepening Lent of repentance... and the hope and promise of forgiveness... I'm reminded that Lent is an invitation to not pretend that we're more than we are... I invite you to not pretend...

Mike+