

Entering into the Mystery

II Kings 2:1-12

Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration Sunday, February 15, 2015

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Both of our passages for this Sunday offer mystery. Mysterious tales, fantastical narratives, things about which we, most of us, would say we had never witnessed. Visions, and people who appear in the air, and the taking up of a prophet without death.

It is surprising, in one way, that we have these stories in our Bible at all. People who see visions sometimes are hesitant to share their experiences with others. If you share that you saw a vision, people might wonder if there is something wrong with you. They might even question privately WHAT is wrong with you. They might suggest a visit to a doctor, or a therapist, or note that there are pills that might help with that...

But in the times when these texts were written, mysteries, such as the ascension of Elijah, when the chariot swung low; mysteries, such as the vision of Jesus, who appeared with Moses and Elijah, above the mountain, dressed in dazzling white robes – these kinds of mysteries – these kinds of visions – were not a sign of illness, but, conversely, blessing – a sign of God's presence and guidance.

Elisha received a double portion of Elijah's spirit. The disciples – Peter, James, and John – received a divine command, echoing the word that came at Jesus' baptism – This is my Beloved Son – Listen to him!

Both Elisha and the disciples went on to continue the prophetic acts of those they followed. For them, entering into the mystery meant delving deeper, going further, opening themselves to become more profoundly impacted by the teaching and leadership of those whom they followed.

So what might these visions – these special events – these mysteries – mean to us?

We can say that Elijah and Jesus were clearly special – that among the OT and NT figures, they are pre-eminent. Both rose, and arose. Elijah did not taste death, although we have much evidence that he experienced disappointment and even despair – a thorough loss of hope in the course of his earthly ministry. But he, like Jesus, was raised by God to heaven.

Another thing that is clear is that both Jesus and Elijah ran afoul of the authorities of their times. Both were known as prophets, and were often found to be confusing, and confounding, to their enemies – and even to their friends and those who loved and followed them.

When each left his earthly ministry, those left behind felt bereft and abandoned.

Elisha grieved, tearing his clothes. The disciples who climbed the mountain with Jesus suggested building booths – small huts – shrines, really, in which worship and commemoration might take place – in the hope, perhaps, that this mystery would not come again, and could only become a thing to be remembered – not enacted, not followed with more mystery, more suffering, more responsibility. And both Elisha and the disciples, Peter, James and John left these mysteries and entered into times in their ministries that were deeper, more profound, more alarming, more confusing, and often, more downright scary.

Elisha grabbed the mantle of Elijah as he was being taken up – which was appropriate, in that the mantle of responsibility was passed to him when Elijah left. And so the mystery into which he entered meant increased responsibility, increased faithfulness, increased power, coupled with increased risk.

Peter, James and John came down the mountain with Jesus, and together, they turned toward Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the destination many of the 12 had thought to avoid, because they knew that there, they would find enemies of Jesus – enemies of his vision, enemies of what he was trying to do, enemies who might try to do him harm – and who might, if they, the disciples, were associated with him, might put them at peril as well.

We may also feel abandoned, alone, fearful, when we enter deeper into the mystery of following Jesus. We might wonder whether we dare go farther, wider, deeper.

Transfiguration Sunday, this Sunday, when we read these texts, always occurs the Sunday before Lent begins. It is always Transfiguration three days before Ash Wednesday. Before the journey to the cross – our annual journey – commences; before the time of meditation, and reflection, and penitence, and reconciliation comes; before all that, we are presented with these mysteries, these wonders, these visions, that present us with a view of who Christ is and what it means to follow him – up the mountain, and to Calvary. And we are left with the question: Do we want to enter in? Are we ready to go deeper?

Are we prepared for a closer, more profound relationship with Jesus? A relationship that will ask more of us? A relationship that will call us to a more profound relationship with those to whom Jesus sends us? Are we ready to enter into the mystery – the mystery of ever closer, ever deeper, ever more faithful following of Jesus?

We must ask this question. We must ponder, friends, because following Jesus can get us into trouble. It will put us in tight spaces. It might leave us with people mad, and upset, and angry.

If you don't believe me, try suggesting, over coffee, after worship, that you have come to understand that Jesus is a Savior who desires healing for all, and because you have come to understand Jesus as the one who heals, you, as a believer and follower of Jesus, have become convinced that people trying to recover from addiction in this town deserve to live in particular neighborhoods, and just see what happens next.

And please understand – I'm not suggesting that all who follow Jesus will come to the same conclusion, based on faith, on that question, or a host of others. When pastors met with Mayor Mihalik to ask her support for a community conversation about addiction and recovery, she suggested that if we pulled off a resolution that made everyone happy, we should take on flood mitigation next!

This is part of the difficulty, the complexity, the challenge of following Jesus. We do not get a rule book that will clearly answer every question posed to us.

What I am saying is that if we enter more deeply into the mystery that is discipleship to Jesus of Nazareth, it will not always be a comfortable, joy-filled thing. If we are faithful, it will not always make everyone happy.

Elijah and Elisha did not always make those in power happy. Both had the authorities seeking to take their lives. Jesus rarely made those in power happy. He was, in the end – the end that was the beginning we will celebrate on Easter – he was, in that first ending, executed by the state. The disciples who ascended the mountain with Jesus – all of them died by execution, because those in power knew that they were playing with, speaking of, in touch with a mystery that is powerful and deep and profound. And those in power often get itchy when sources of power which they cannot control are accessed and put to use.

So we must ask – are we ready to follow Jesus? Are we prepared for what that will mean? Both the joy and the life-giving nature of this following, and the fact that at times it will feel like a bigger burden than we are ready to carry?

Through this Lenten season to come, we are offering opportunities to delve more deeply into prayer, and faith formation, for you and for your families. We are offering this because we know, here at FPC, that following Jesus is not an easy call. It is something that must be learned. We have to be formed, and informed. We have to avail ourselves of opportunities to learn and to discuss with one another, and to encourage and empower one another, and to receive courage and power for ourselves in the exchange.

This is why we are offering studies on prayer and raising children in faith this Lenten season. We offer, knowing at least in part, knowing in human ways, which are always partial, always impaired – but we offer these studies, because we know, in our human, frail way that we all need to grow in faith. We all need to grow in our ability and capacity to follow Jesus.

And I am convicted that the process of entering into the mystery which is faithful discipleship is the sole journey where life, the only true life, can be found.

Come friends, let us enter into the mystery together, and journey with Jesus down the mountain, to the cross, and beyond.