

Transfiguration of Our Lord (19 February 2012)

MK 9.2-9

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What an odd pairing of biblical stories this morning—Elijah’s disappearance into clouds and Elisha’s subsequent investiture as prophet, and Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain top. Separated by centuries, each story describes a scene more fantastic than the last.

In 2 Kings, Elijah crosses the Jordan River with this apprentice Elisha, and is quickly caught up into heaven in a flaming chariot drawn by torch-like horses. Elisha is left standing on the wrong side of the river, clutching Elijah’s robe in trembling hands, wondering what in heaven’s name he is supposed to do next.

In MK 9, Jesus hikes to the top of a mountain to meet his two dead friends—the prophets Moses and Elijah. Jesus’ clothes become whiter than even Oxyclean could bleach them, and he chats with these prophets, long-dead but still much-revered. His disciples, like Elisha, stand slack-jawed and useless at the sight.

Rivers forded and mountains climbed, burning chariots and gleaming robes, dead prophets and dopey disciples. Sounds more like a bad Nicolas Cage movie (is there any other kind?) than holy scripture. So why do we read them?

The *scriptural* connection between the stories, a connection that mattered a great deal to first century believers, is that Jesus is not just a promising preacher with healing in his hands; he is also a prophet of rock star status—an equal with Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of all time. The *liturgical* significance of these paired stories is that we get one last glimpse of Jesus in his heavenly glory before venturing into Lent—a season in which Jesus is battered, bloodied, bullied, belied, and finally beaten. The *practical* application? A little less clear.

Look again. Elijah reminds people a lot of Moses—a prophet with commanding presence, unassailable leadership qualities, and a direct line to God. But Elijah’s life and work are nearly over; he needs a deputy to take over in his stead. With a smack of his robe on the waters of the Jordan, Elijah creates a dry path for him and Elisha to travel. (Not unlike Moses’ parting of the Red Sea back in EX.) Suddenly, the heavens open (not unlike at Jesus’ baptism) and chariots of fire drawn by flaming horses careen toward earth. Elijah is snatched from where he stood and whisked off to heaven, never to be seen again.

What happens next? Do the people of Israel bow and scrape in Elisha’s presence; do they go wild with excitement over their new prophet? Hardly. Witnesses go looking for Elijah, preferring him to Elisha. The locals then complain to Elisha about a pond whose water has gone bad. A group of boys chase Elisha shouting “Baldy, Baldy.” (Elisha sics an angry mother bear on them, mauling 42.) (2 Kings 2.13. ff) Hardly a good first day for Israel’s next Great Prophet.

And in MK? Jesus also has his moment in the sun—in bedazzled garb he chats up Elijah and Moses. It was a surrealistic scene intended to remind Jesus that he really was God’s Anointed One, and to confirm to his disciples that this Jesus was more than just a street preacher. But when the clouds lifted and Elijah and Moses returned to wherever dead prophets go, it was just Jesus in his dusty robe, flanked by disciples who were more often a disappointment than a delight.

That shining moment, that instant of clarity, that slap up-side the head is inspiring, and beautiful, and hopeful. It's called an epiphany—a moment of revealing. But it doesn't last. And we are left standing stunned in what little remains of its glory.

We are like Kim Kardashian who quickly deduced that weddings are a lot more fun than marriage. Or my nephew, a newly-minted Iowa high school teacher, who on his first day in the classroom was beaten by a student's swinging computer cable. Or a candidate who wins the election, only to discover that he is as powerless to effect change and as hated as the bum he beat.

Those shining moments—those epiphanies—are quickly replaced by what a friend calls a stupiphany—the sudden realization that you have been terribly, horribly wrong.

Elisha eventually had to ford the river back to reality. Jesus had to descend the mountain back to endless demands and angry opponents. And us? That's mostly where we live. On the wrong side of the river. In the shadow of the summit. Clutching the tattered remnants of joy, shards of hope in our hands.

We are meant to take comfort in these stories, knowing that when this life is over, when like Elijah, our work is done, glory waits for us. We anticipate that day when, like the disciples, we will see Jesus as he truly is, face-to-face. We firmly believe there is a better place, more laughter than tears, peace and rest and delight waiting for us in God's Kingdom when we die.

But, perhaps foolishly, I imagine that Last Great Day is quite a distance away yet. I know that any of us can be called from this life with no notice, but most likely there is a lot more ground to be covered on this side of the river, at the base of this mountain, far from glory, nearer to tears.

Listen: “. . . 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.” (2 COR 4.6) It may sound familiar; we read it this morning.

That light that shines in the darkness gleams not only in an ancient book or on a distant mountaintop. The light of hope, the glimmer of glory, the presence of God lives among us, in us, and through us. We carry that light that shines in the darkness—in our hearts, in our lives, in our mouths, in our hands.

There are days when the only way we know the glory of God, the light of Christ, is that someone shows it to us. Someone who walks beside us on this side of the river, someone who has seen the view from the top, but now chooses to tread the valley with us.

Today we read of glory—ancient promises from ancient prophets. Today we remember glory—Jesus' triumph over sin, death and the power of the devil. And today we share glory—reminding one another of the light that shines in the darkness. And that the darkness cannot overcome it.