

A Chariot and Horses of Fire

Earlier this morning Christine read the account of Elijah being taken to heaven from the Hebrew Bible. We can hear in that account the depths of shock – and sadness – that Elijah’s mentee feels with the ascension of Elijah into heaven. “As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, ‘My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!’ And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two,” (2 Kings 2:11-12).

Prior to this, Elijah had been telling Elisha that his time here below was coming to an end. Even though he had been prepared for Elijah’s imminent departure, the method and speed in which it occurred came as quite a shock to Elisha. Can you imagine seeing a chariot and horses of fire, and the man who had been like a father to you just disappear before your eyes? The Scripture records that Elisha tore the robe he was wearing in two. In those days, and in that culture, this action of Elisha was a visible sign of deep grief and despair. Something else they did in those days to show sorrow and remorse was to wear sackcloth and ashes.

Speaking of ashes, Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lenten season, is a few days from now. We’ll gather here that evening at 7:00, to participate in a traditional Ash Wednesday worship service, including the imposition of ashes. We do this as a visible reminder of our need for repentance and redemption – and of our mortality. I hope we see you on Wednesday night.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday in the Church calendar. It’s always the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Each year over the three year lectionary cycle, we look at a different Gospel account of the Transfiguration. This year’s Gospel lesson comes from Mark. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Mark 9:2-9.

Read Mark 9:2-9.

The Transfiguration = Jesus Exposed!

Prior to what happens in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus has been traveling the Holy Land. He’s rebuked the Pharisees. He’s been in Tyre, modern-day Lebanon, and healed the demon-possessed daughter of a Syriophoenician woman. He’s healed a deaf and mute man. And He’s fed a crowd of 4,000 with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. Jesus and the disciples have traveled to Bethsaida, where He’s healed a blind man, and Peter – after seeing all the stuff Jesus is doing – finally declares to Jesus, “You are the Messiah,” (Mark 8:29).

So that's where our lesson this morning picks up. We're told, "after six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There He was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them," (Mark 9:2-3). Can you picture that? For Mark to record – and the other Gospel accounts also make mention of it – that Jesus' clothes were "dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them," they had to be extremely white!

What's the whitest thing you've ever seen? Maybe fresh-fallen snow? Or the bright white shine of a fluorescent light-bulb or one of those new blinding LED headlights that blind you on the road as you drive towards them at night? The three disciples with Jesus see Him transfigured. They see His full divinity on display momentarily. They see Him as He truly is. "The Lord wraps Himself in light as with a garment; He stretches out the heavens like a tent," the Psalmist (104:2) writes. Jesus is God – we know this – but at the time, the jury was still out on who Jesus is.

Elijah and Moses

Notice what happens next in today's Gospel lesson. "And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus," (Mark 9:4). We talked earlier about how Elijah was carried off to heaven by a chariot and horses of fire in the whirlwind. Jewish people considered Elijah to be the preeminent prophet of their faith. He's so important to them that during the Passover celebration, the Jews, even today, have a special cup and place designated for Elijah to come join them in the Seder meal. The guy didn't die – he was carried off to heaven.

Moses, the other giant of the Jewish faith, mentioned by Mark, did die. We're told in Deuteronomy 34, "And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone," (verses 6-7). Moses' death is unusual, because God buried him, he seemed to be relatively healthy, and no one knew where he was buried. So for Peter, James, and John to see Moses and Elijah physically standing there on the mountaintop with Jesus – that's an experience that any good Jew would love to have!

What we see here is the physical embodiment of the Law, represented by Moses, and the Prophets, represented by Elijah, in conversation with Jesus. These two heroes of the faith are the ultimate character references for a Jewish leader, and here they are, on the mountaintop talking to Jesus. And that brings us to Peter's statement: "‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah,’ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)," (Mark 9:5-6). Mark notes the disciples were frightened. And Peter speaks up about building three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

Shelters on the Mountaintop

There are a couple problems with what Peter suggests. First, if they build shelters on the mountaintop, how likely are they to head back down the mountain? They wouldn't. They'd be stuck – content to sit there on the mountaintop in perpetuity. Another issue with Peter's statement is the view he takes of Jesus. Peter wants to build three shelters. One for Jesus. One for Moses. One for Elijah. He puts Jesus on the same level as a couple ancient heroes of faith. That's a problem – because Moses was just a man, and he sinned. Elijah was just a man, and he sinned. But Jesus, fully Man, and fully God, is living, breathing Perfection. Jesus is on a level all by Himself.

What I'm trying to say here is that the other guys – as great and holy as they were – don't hold a candle to Jesus. Jesus is God in human skin – those other guys were just regular people, like you and me, in need of redemption. "Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is My Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!'" (verse 7). See, Jesus – God – understands the shock and awe that Peter and the two other guys were feeling, standing in the presence of greatness. So He reveals His Triune presence in the cloud and the voice, which reminds us of a simple truth. The word God the Father speaks from the cloud, "This is My Son, the Beloved," are the same words He spoke at Jesus' baptism, where we began this series a few weeks ago.

The mystery has come full circle. In spite of all that we've learned about Jesus – His urgency, His authority, His power to heal, and now His place far above even the greatest of prophets – the secret to His identity still lies in His status as God's Son, in the baptismal revelation of the One to whom He belongs. "Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead," (verses 8-9). Jesus' identity is fully revealed only to these three guys at this point – He tells them to keep it under wraps until His crucifixion and resurrection – but this event gives them clarity about who Jesus really is.

Baptism into God's Family

Likewise, in our baptism, we take on an identity as members of God's family. Those vows we take in the Sacrament of Baptism are important to our walk as we follow Jesus. When we circle back to this core truth – that we are God's people, bought with His own blood – we are reminded again and again that we are His beloved children. We gain layered epiphanies of how abundant His love for us truly is!

Love is what connects us in creation and call. We're reminded of that love in our baptism. We're reminded of that love when we follow Jesus. We're reminded of that love when we act out of love towards brothers and sisters – like we're doing today with

gathering all these food items and money for Agape. Or when we tithe – and trust that God will use our gift, whatever those gifts may be – to further God’s kingdom.

We act on that love when we do these things, and when we share the good news with others. Sometimes, in order to share the good news, we first have to meet a more immediate physical need – for food, shelter, clothing. The love of Christ is why we do the things we do. God is revealed to us through the abundant, unmerited love of Jesus Christ poured out for us.

A Great Cloud of Witnesses

At the transfiguration of Jesus, He is surrounded by those past and present – Peter, James, John; as well as Moses and Elijah. We too are surrounded and do not journey alone. The writer of Hebrews tells us, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith,” (12:1-2a). We carry with us the cloud of witnesses who have lived before us. We carry with us the saints, our family, friends, colleagues, and even the strangers in our midst.

And together we are transformed. Together we are a beacon of light to others, inviting them to join on the walk as we circle back to the One who created us, who loves us, and who calls us to “come and follow” Him. We can never completely understand this mysterious Messiah who we follow, but by walking in His ways of love and daily answering His invitation to “come and see,” we can grow closer to Him and participate in His revelation to the world which He loves enough to lay aside His own life.

Prayer: Holy God, You have revealed the glory of Your love in Jesus Christ, and have given us a share in Your Spirit. May we who listen to Christ follow faithfully, and, in the dark places where You send us, reveal the light of Your gospel. Amen.