

2 Kings 2:1-12

2:1 Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

2:2 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.

2:3 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."

2:4 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.

2:5 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."

2:6 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.

2:7 Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.

2:8 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.

2:9 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."

2:10 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."

2:11 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.

2:12 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.

Mark 9:2-9

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,

9:3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

9:4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

9:5 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."

9:6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

9:7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

9:8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9:9 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.

Proclamation of the Word

I have to admit to you that my favorite part of the Super Bowl is the halftime show. That Sunday night, we Tiger fans probably loved Katy Perry aflame entering in on her giant golden tiger singing "Roar." There was the one uncoordinated shark who got beat up in the press. The show was spectacular, out of this world, pushing every possible entertainment edge to go bigger and better than last year. Each fan in the stands even had a light to shine at just the right coordinated moment. The Show ended with Katy Perry as a shooting star and all fireworks lighting up the night sky. I do not know how they can ever outdo the show and then each year, somehow, with millions of dollars, they outdo themselves again and again. It was a memorable event.

While the Super Bowl 49 half-time show will soon be a distant memory, today we read about an event that happened 2000 years ago that still amazes and baffles us. There was no video so we have to read and imagine the scene of Jesus standing on a mountaintop with his three disciples, his clothes and countenance glowing surrounded by Moses and Elijah, revealing to us once again that Jesus is God's beloved Son. In a related story, we read of the prophet Elijah and his young protege Elisha. Elijah leaves this world in a whirlwind with chariot as of fire leaving Elisha to carry on God's work as a spokesperson for Yahweh, the Lord. Picture it in your mind- as spectacular as the Super Bowl, but without the hundreds of sound, lights, and production engineers to make it happen. This was God's show- mountaintop experiences full of God's presence and glory.

Without going into the how it happened whether the transfiguration of Jesus or the taking of Elijah, we will focus on the meaning of what happened.

One thing that is going on here is a change, a transition in leadership. Jesus has told his disciples that he will go to Jerusalem to die. Here on this mountaintop, the disciples want to build tents, or booths, for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to camp out and stay. They want to hold onto him. Mark writes that they were terrified. Elijah wants to hold onto his mentor, Elijah, refusing to leave his side and following him every step until Elijah departs the earth. Elisha was probably very fearful just as Peter, James, and John were. Change and loss of dear ones, especially the one who has guided your life, is scary. Put yourself in their shoes.

I think most of us can relate. Let's consider changes particularly our life in the church. Eight years ago a dearly loved pastor, Jim Richardson, retired leaving the church in a time of transition. Since then other beloved members and staff have moved on, leaving us behind to continue the mission and ministry of Fort Hill Church. Departures are hard. But new members and new staff have join us. Our search committee is working to call a new associate pastor. We look forward to a new phase in our life

with new colleagues in ministry, but we treasure those meaningful moments in our faith life together. We can be honest about that loss and grief. We can also be excited about the future.

The community is changing around us. Our little college town is changing. The University is changing by increasing in enrollment. The push for research has increased. The campus is expanding at a rapid pace. I hear retired professors talk about teaching here 20 years ago. Their experience sound so different. In my conversations with professors now, I hear strain and stress as their student loads increase. I am concerned about the stress that our members are under not on at the University, but in all walks of life. I am concerned that work has become an idol, a false god, that does not give life. Everything is amped up, demanding more at a faster pace. We find ourselves nostalgic for the days when life seemed slower.

Our personal lives change. After taking our first college visits as a family this Friday, I am shocked that Chuck and I are in this place with our children. What happened to the little girl in pigtails in her cozy coop car and the little boy who climbed anything, making my heart leap with fear? Children grow. Life does not slow down. We want to bottle those moments. Stop life right there.

Culture changes. In our marriage seminar last month, it became clear that what we all had in common was the concern for commitment and faithfulness in marriage. In a consumer culture that asks what's in it for me rather than what is my responsibility, the nature of commitment has changed. Marriage in scripture was more about duty and responsibility than romantic love. But our understanding has evolved to include love as a factor, not just duty. My marriage to Chuck started with a Valentine Card in my college mailbox, so I celebrate that 24 years ago, he was brave enough to do that. I celebrate that the covenant of marriage is now about committing to the one you love with all your heart.

Or consider the larger experience of church in our lifetimes. The traditional church of my youth functioned as a centerpiece of community life. Built up by a generation who tithed their money and served with time, younger generations, including my own generation, sometimes look at the church for goods and services. What can the church do for me? Again, commitment and responsibility is key to our covenant life as the Church.

I hear moaning that the church is dying, and some of that is true. The institution of the last century has been dying, but something new is rising up. The Presbyterian Church has a vision for 1001 worshiping communities to form and grow the church in God's Spirit. And this past year we celebrated that almost 300 new faith communities formed through the work of the Spirit. 300 new little churches have started to grow.

We are living through a time of enormous transition. These are just a handful of ways we are impacted. Just as the transition from Elijah to Elisha, the reality, as Michael Coffey writes is, "Fathers pass on spirit to sons. Mothers to daughters. Mentors to disciples....Professors to students. It is inevitable and it haunts these relationships throughout: the older must die or move on, and the

younger must pick up the mantle, do the things the father, mother, teacher did, and even do them... better. The spirit, the authority, the empowerment, must be passed on, and must be taken up with courage."ⁱ

How do we claim that power, authority and courage for a new day? How are being called to take up the mantle in today's world?

I have an idea...

Our Moderator Heath Rada spoke at Presbytery meeting. He was recently asked to meet with Christians from Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon who are in terrible crisis with the recent state of affairs. This ecumenical group of Christians asked to meet with only 2 church representatives, the Roman Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) of all of the Christian denominations. Why these two churches? The reason is that we have built hospitals, schools, and churches there in prior generations. We have shown the love and mercy of Jesus Christ in our witness. We are partners in ministry. Heath Rada said that they went, not because they can fix the problems of terrorism and economic destruction, they went to witness to the hope we have in Jesus Christ and to quote, "put a lovin' on them." Which is a southerner's way of saying, "We showed up and were present to show our love for them in the midst of their troubles and to listen to them." They listened to their hopes and disappointments, their worries and wonderings. There is a power in being present and listening, isn't there? We are called to stand with those who are oppressed and afraid, to be channels of peace and courage.

And we all know that you do not have to go to the Middle East to do this. As those at the University of North Carolina know too well this week, we need to stand against violence against anyone based on race, nationality, and faith tradition. Followers of Jesus are called to build bridges of peace even with those of other faiths because we believe in a sovereign God who is Lord of all nations and peoples. I think we have an urgent call in this area.

Notice what happens on the mountain, when Peter, James, and John, with all their fears and hopes bundled together, encounter Jesus. Just as in Jesus' baptism, God reveals that this is his Beloved Son and commands, "Listen to him."

In the moment the disciples did not want this incredible vision, the glory, to end. They delighted in the presence of God's glory. When they could not see the plan ahead, they marveled in the mystery of divine presence. Faith is not safe, stable, or manageable, but through God's grace, we have a faith that is mysterious and meaningful. If we knew exactly what God was up to, faith would not be required. We are called to listen to Jesus, to be in his presence and to trust him with our present and our future.

As Frederick Beuchner writes about transfiguration in his book "Whistling in the Dark",

“[In the Transfiguration] it was the holiness of [Jesus] shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it that they were almost blinded. Even with us something like that happens once in a while. The face of a man walking his child in the park, of a woman picking peas in the garden, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a beer at a Saturday baseball game in July. Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it’s almost beyond bearing” (Whistling in the Dark, Harper San Francisco, 1988, p. 108).

Maybe Beuchner is being too mundane with his idea of transfiguration, those moments of holiness and presence, when we are transformed and changed, but Jesus always showed his glory and brought change to folks in their everyday lives. It was rarely a pull out all the stops Super Bowl Half-time show.

Scott Hoezee of Calvin Seminary writes:

Even on all kinds of days when the disciples and Jesus were by no means having a mountaintop experience and when dazzling garments whiter than white were nowhere to be seen, even then when Jesus smiled kindly at lepers, looked pained to see a “sinner” being shunned by the Temple establishment, or looked winsome after telling a hurting prostitute to go in peace because her sins were forgiven, there was sense in which the disciples were seeing the face of the divine transfigured in also those ordinary moments. They were seeing hints of glory. They were seeing true God of true God, vividly and surprisingly and, yes, dazzlingly on display in God’s One and Only Son, full of grace and truth.ⁱⁱ

I hope in all of life's changes that you can see that same face of God's glory and know God's gracious presence.

Then take up the mantle of faith and be a part of what God is up to in our day and time. Like Elisha and the disciples, it's our turn to be the courageous and faithful people of God.

We are not alone. We look to Jesus, for he is the Beloved Son, and we are commanded by the Father to listen to him. This is the source of our strength, power, and courage so that all lives are transformed for the better.

May it be so.

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

ⁱ Posted 13th February 2012 by [Michael Coffey](http://mccoffey.blogspot.com/2012/02/make-mine-double.html), <http://mccoffey.blogspot.com/2012/02/make-mine-double.html>

ⁱⁱ Scott Hoezee, at Calvin Seminary, http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-6b-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel#sthash.OfvSnvAD.dpuf