

## **In the Place of Wonder**

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

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### *2 Kings 2:1-12*

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 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. 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." 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. 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." 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. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 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.

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." 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." 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. 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*

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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 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." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

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.

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Our gospel lesson opens with a simple phrase that could almost go unnoticed, 'Six days later,' yet knowing about those days helps us to understand and appreciate what happens on this particular day. Peter and James and John have just been on an overwhelming whirlwind of

experiences with Jesus. In just the last few weeks they have fed 4000 people with a bit of bread and fish, been tested by the Pharisees seeking a sign from heaven as credentials for Jesus, had an awkward conversation with Jesus as again they did not understand just who he is, they were present for the healing of a blind man, they heard people say that Jesus was John the Baptist or Elijah or a prophet returned, Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, and then they heard the most disturbing and terrifying news of all. Jesus quite openly and plainly had told his disciples that he would undergo great suffering, be rejected and be killed, and after three days rise again. Peter was the first to have found his voice after that revelation and challenged Jesus, only to be rebuked, not comforted, by Jesus. The disciples and the crowds now all know that they must deny themselves and take up their cross and to follow Jesus.

Now six days after learning that their teacher, their leader, will indeed suffer, die and yet somehow rise again, they are out hiking a mountain. For now there are no hungry crowds, no healings being sought, no challenging Pharisees, no devastating news to have to accept. The physical exertion of climbing the mountain is a physical release of the strains, the busyness, and the emotions they have been carrying. This is a respite, a time to think, to process, all that they have recently known, seen, heard and felt. They have literally stepped away from the hectic, frantic yet essential pace as Jesus' disciples and are just beginning to fully see and grasp what this truly means.

Suddenly into the midst of this day trip, Jesus was transfigured, transformed, before them. He was dazzling white, stunning, gleaming, glowing. His face shown radiant just as they knew Moses face had shown when he came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. This is perhaps how Elijah radiated just before he ascended on a chariot of fire in a whirlwind into heaven. Now, suddenly, unexpectedly, Moses and Elijah stand with Jesus. The Law and the Prophets stand with the Messiah, and they talk together, as Jesus is about to fulfill both prophecy and the law.

If these past few weeks have been incredulous for Peter, James and John, how much more so this very moment. This is truly a time for awe and wonder, to marvel and be still. The Law, the Prophets, the Messiah, share conversation, love and wisdom. Is it any wonder that Peter and the others want to stay, want to dwell, in this incredible sacred mountaintop experience, despite being terrified?

The Gospel tells us, "And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus." In this short passage, this is the second simple phrase that could almost go unnoticed as we tend to rush ahead to Peter's construction plan, to God's call to listen, and the journey back down the mountain.

Such an awesome and astonishing image that Mark just casually reports, yet we need to dwell here for a moment to pause and wonder what they talked about, what they said. We cannot stay here, but it is important to rest here a moment.

Pastor and poet Maren Tirabassi\* invites us to wonder about if we had an opportunity to speak with those who have been gone a long time but who had formed and shaped, guided and led us to where we are now.....

It's often just a small detail in the shiny story  
about Jesus and the mountain –  
getting to talk to folks  
who have been gone a long time.  
I would like Harriet Tubman, please,

that Moses  
to walk and talk with me.  
I want Langston Hughes,  
dreams deferred in a still small voice.  
Heck, I want Mark Twain,  
Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson,  
Susan B. Anthony, Cesar Chavez,  
and Rosa Parks.  
Not gone so long,  
but our valleys want to eavesdrop  
on John Lewis  
and Ruth Bader Ginsberg.  
I promise not to hold on  
to these remarkable visitors –  
(I gave up booth-building  
a long time ago.)  
My Mama wasn't famous, of course,  
though she laid down the law.  
Her prophecies were the simple ones –  
more snow or early spring,  
and what would make a child happy.

Who formed and shaped, guided and led, you on your faith journey but is no longer here with us?

Today at noon we will gather on Zoom for our Annual Meeting, a different way to continue a covenantal tradition that has happened continuously at this church since the beginning. We will meet to look back at 2020 and to plan for this year, and beyond. To do this we will dwell with all those who came before us at Smith Church, who had their own plans, decisions, hopes, budgets, global challenges, joys and concerns that they prayed about, talked about, that all led to our time together this afternoon. Whether they are people we met, worshipped with, ministered with, worked with prayed with, played with, or are names on old faded pages or etched on a plaque, what we will soon do today is in part a conversation with those who came before us.

They too had their mountaintop experiences, their desire to dwell in praise and wonder, their times to be reminded, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him," their times to come down the mountain, roll up their sleeves and do the work God had created and called them to do.

We will also have a new member in our midst, someone who has joined us in faithful covenant to continue the work set before us.

In our prayers, our reports, our discussions, we will be coming down the mountain listening for the ways that Jesus, the Beloved Son is calling us. We will listen, not just to hear, but as Alan Alda defines it, "Listening is being able to be changed by the other person." In these unsure times of the pandemic when we cannot yet gather safely together, the early vaccine rollout, the political, climate and financial concerns, so much of what we have known is changing. Let us listen well, listen deeply, to Jesus that we might be changed for the work set before us.

Friends, if we listen to Jesus, for Jesus, as the mysterious voice in the cloud commanded us to do, Christ's radiance will illuminate our path, and guide us into the future. Amen.

\*On the Mountain written by Maren Tirabassi 2/11/21