

February 14, 2021  
The Transfiguration of Our Lord  
Year B  
2 Kings 2:2-12  
Mark 9:2-9  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Zoom Worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic  
Pastor Amanda Warner

### Only Jesus

When I read the first reading for today, the reading from Second Kings, I found that I could relate to Elisha in a way that I never could before. People kept taking him aside and warning him, that something bad was going to happen, that someone he loved, someone he had traveled with, someone he had served, someone he had looked up to as a spiritual leader, was going to be taken away from him.

You can look at this story in more than one way.

It is a story about the glory of Elijah, the blessing of Elijah, who did not die, but who was taken into heaven, in a whirlwind, in the glory of heavenly fire, that represented the presence of God.

It is a story about the choosing of Elisha, the equipping of Elisha to carry on the prophetic ministry of Elijah.

But it is also a story about loss. It is the story of something being taken away from Elisha. It is a story of grief.

It seems that Elisha knew it was coming; that he and many other prophets knew it was coming. Apparently, the action that God was about to take on behalf of Elijah was something that God had chosen to reveal to the community of prophets in Israel. Even Elijah knew what was coming. Perhaps that is why he kept trying to talk Elisha into leaving him. At Gilgal, at Bethel, at Jordan, Elijah tried to get Elisha to stay behind, not to make the long journey that would end in him being

taken away from Elisha. But Elisha refused, saying “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”

Everywhere they went the community of prophets gathered to tell Elisha, to warn Elisha about what it coming, that the Lord would take Elijah away from him. Elisha did know, but it didn’t dissuade him from wanting to be with Elijah when it happened.

When the moment came for Elijah’s departure, Elisha was there, along with fifty other prophets, to bear witness. Elijah, his teacher, Elijah, his mentor, Elijah, the one who he called “father” was taken into heaven in glory. Elisha was blessed to be able to see that glory and knew, because he had seen Elijah’s departure, that his final request of Elijah had been granted by God, for only God would have given what Elisha had asked for, a double share of Elijah’s spirit, the inheritance of Elijah’s prophetic ministry and power.

But Elisha’s response was not one of jubilation. It was one of grief. He tore his own garments in two pieces, which is an action that grieving people took in the ancient world. For Elisha, this story is a story of loss. And because of that, it’s a story that resonated for me, now, perhaps more than it ever has before.

In some ways, though, Elisha had it easier than we did. At least he got some warning, that he was going to experience loss. That’s more than we got in this, our season of loss.

I’m sure that you all remember those mid-February days a year ago. When there were a few news reports about a new virus, so far away, in Wuhan, China. When we were going about our lives as if nothing could change, as if troubles so far away, on the other side of the world could never come and disrupt us.

Did we even think to pray for the people halfway around the world from us, struggling with something called a Coronavirus or did we let their suffering go in one ear and out the other?

Did we hear and heed the warnings of the prophets who told us that it might come here, might come to us, where we live?

I remember talking with friends while we watched our children play on the playground after school. Asking the question of whether this virus would touch our lives. One of my friends asked me if I thought that they would cancel schools for a while, to slow down the spread of the virus. I said that I didn't think so. I couldn't imagine something like that happening. A snow day I understand, but canceling school for a pandemic was something that I had never thought could happen.

We had that conversation on March 12<sup>th</sup>. There were 1, 690 cases of the Coronavirus, that had started to be called Covid-19, in the whole United States that day. Later that evening I took Abigail to Karate and while I was there my phone rang. It was the superintendent of the Norwood Public Schools, announcing that school was cancelled for the next day and for the three weeks afterward due to concerns about Covid-19. I spent the rest of the Karate practice texting with the Executive Team, asking what we should do about worship on Sunday. We decided to cancel worship for that week, and take a week-to-week approach for a while until we had a better handle on what was going on.

The Karate teacher told the people doing their lessons that they were not planning to close their studio, but that they would be increasing their cleaning measures. The next week we got an email that they were moving their classes online.

Between a conversation at three o'clock during which I said that I couldn't imagine school being cancelled, to texting about canceling worship at eight o'clock, something I have never done in my entire career, it felt like the world shifted. And it kept shifting. I don't need to go into the whole thing with you. You've lived it with me, we've lived it together. We have our shared stories. We all have our own stories. We know how much we have lost this year; how many things have been stripped away from us.

I guess I'm thinking about it more right now, because we are a month away from the anniversary of the shutdown. I remember what I was doing last year at this time, mid-February, Transfiguration Sunday. I remember things I was looking

forward to, things that never happened. I remember not being able to imagine the kind of eleven months that we have lived through; the loss, the grief, the suffering, the loneliness, the powerlessness, the political upheaval, all of it. All of the times that we have, in our hearts if not in observable reality, torn our clothes in grief. All of our stories of loss.

Then we have as our gospel reading for today, the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. And if you look at through a certain lens, it is also a story of loss.

I've talked in other sermons about how Peter and James and John and the rest of the disciples, must have had many, many moments when they were not sure what they had gotten themselves into. Last week's gospel reading is a perfect example, but it is certainly not the only example. In last Sunday's gospel reading, the disciples find themselves searching for Jesus, hunting for him, in the very early morning, so that he could come back into their town of Capernaum and continue the healing ministry that he had started there. But that's not what Jesus did. Instead, he told them that they had to leave, that they had to go to other towns, other communities, not only to heal, but to proclaim his message, that the kingdom of God had come near.

That was, perhaps the first, but certainly not the last time that the disciples were surprised by Jesus, and it was not always in a good way. He frequently didn't do the things that they expected him to do or that they wanted him to do. He clearly had power, he clearly was deeply connected with God, he clearly had an authority that no one else in their experience had, but he didn't use it. He didn't use it for his own aggrandizement. He didn't use it to make himself or his followers rich. He didn't use it to achieve anyone's political goals or military goals. He didn't even use it to have an overwhelmingly efficient healing ministry.

He certainly healed, he certainly cast out demons, but he didn't do it in the most effective way that he could have. He never stayed in any one place long enough to heal every sick person who could reach him in that place. He wandered

and his healing ministry was more chance driven that it should have been if that had been the point of his ministry.

He spent his time on people who didn't seem to deserve it. He antagonized people who could have given him earthly validity.

The disciples, no doubt, knew what Jesus was capable of. They never stopped being compelled by his presence, by his words, by his teachings, by his ministry, but still, the gospels tell us that there were many times when they were simply confused by him, by what he did and what he didn't do, by what he said and what he didn't say.

So, the day of Jesus' Transfiguration must have been a huge relief to the disciples who got to see it, to Peter and James and John, who went up the mountain with Jesus and saw the miracle take place. They saw Jesus, with his true glory revealed to them. He was dazzling, glowing, blinding in his glory. And he was joined by two of the most important teachers and prophets from their histories, Moses and Elijah, whose presence was supposed to precede and announce the Messiah. And then they heard the voice from a cloud, telling them, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Everything that they saw, everything that they heard must have been such a comfort, such an encouragement to them, that this powerful but simple man that they followed that, that they helped, that they sat around campfires with, that they slept in fields with, who touched unclean people, who taught with authority, but who seemed to have no earthly agenda, was truly God's chosen one, God's messiah, the dwelling place of God's glory in the world.

And then, suddenly, it was all gone. The cloud that overshadowed them, Moses and Elijah, even Jesus' shining glory, it was all gone. The text says, "Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus."

Only Jesus. All they were left with was Jesus. And they were told not to tell anyone what they had seen and heard until after "the Son of Man" had risen from

the dead, until after the resurrection, a resurrection that they didn't understand, didn't believe in.

All they were left with was Jesus.

Jesus who led them in strange ways, on a strange and seemingly meandering journey. Jesus, taking the long way to Jerusalem. Jesus who looked at people and loved them. Jesus who touched the unclean ones. Jesus who taught them new things about who God was and how to be faithful. Jesus who never did what they expected him to do.

Our story, too, is one of loss. We have lost a lot in this past year. So many things that we thought were "givens" have been stripped away from us. There are so many ways that the times we are living through have required us to live in new ways, to love in new ways. There are so many ways in which the times that we are living through have challenged us to think in new ways, to be in community in new ways, and to be present to other people's experiences and other people's suffering in new ways as well.

But we also have what those light dazzled and often confused disciples had. We have Jesus, and sometimes it feels like only Jesus; still with us; always with us. We have the memory and the promise of resurrection glory, but we know that we're not there yet. We live here in a world that is so often complicated and disappointing and unfair and heartbreaking.

But we do not live here alone. Jesus sits with us in our grief. Jesus hears our stories. Jesus blesses things that we might have thought of as rejected. Jesus teaches us new things, new ways of being close to God, new ways to be faithful. Jesus walks with us, the long road to Jerusalem, were we, who have known too much of death, will find resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.