

First Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-12

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 **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. 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.”

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. 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.”

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. 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. 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.**

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.”* 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.” 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.** 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.

¹³ Elisha picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

This Reading from 2 Kings deserves a sermon all on its own, but not today. Today, I am using it to stir our imaginations, for Elijah invited Elisha to keep his eyes open - to keep watch for God’s grace and power. Before, I read from the Gospel of Mark, I want to share with you what I appreciate about Elisha. Some might call it a stubborn streak, but I appreciate Elisha’s persistence. Although, Elijah repeatedly said to Elisha, “Stay here.” Elisha didn’t. Elisha felt compelled to stay by the side of his teacher, to travel with Elijah from Gilgal to Bethel, from Bethel to Jericho, from Jericho to the Jordan and finally to the other side of the Jordan. Did you notice the miraculous parting of the waters, not once but twice? Indeed, God was with Elijah and Elisha.

Biblical commentator Maryann McKibben Dana reminds us that we cannot walk the journey for others, we can only accompany them. But, what a powerful witness this is to see Elisha stay with Elijah, resulting in a blessing for his future ministry. Like Elijah, we can invite others who accompany us to keep their eyes open. We can invite them to keep watch for the

evidence of God's grace and power at work. So, this morning I urge you to keep watch, keep your eyes, your ears, your heart and your mind open as you hear a well-worn text, which lies at the epicenter of the Gospel of Mark, halfway between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection.

Second Reading: Mark 9:2-9

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And Jesus was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then 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." ⁶Peter did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Today is what is known as Transfiguration Sunday. It is the liturgical Sunday that precedes Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent each year. In a matter of weeks, we have journeyed from Mary treasuring all she had heard about her newborn son to Peter, James and John being terrified by her transfigured son, from a stable in Bethlehem to a mountain top in the Galilean country side.

Six days earlier Peter had declared of Mary's son, Jesus, "You are the Messiah", but now the reality of his confession was made manifest in a powerful new way. I wonder if you noticed the Gospel writer struggling for words. How do you describe white that is whiter than any white possible? How does one respond to something so beyond one's comprehension?

In this moment beyond words the reality of time was transcended, for Elijah and Moses, ancestors of faith, long dead, suddenly appeared talking with Jesus. I don't think any of us can imagine what it must have been like for these three disciples. Yet, I imagine all of us would have been similarly terrified.

Something beyond words was experienced by Peter, James and John, although Peter babbled on about building monuments to commemorate the experience. Something we have all been prone to do, as we calcify or memorialize experiences when the separation between eternity and the present moment evaporate. We then look backwards, to the monumental moments, even trying to recreate them, rather than live into the momentum of the experiences for our lives.

I wonder have you ever had such an experience of the divine; a moment in time when the veil between eternity and the present lifted? Listen to one such experience by Thomas Merton. It happened in downtown Louisville, and he describes his experience in his book entitled, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that

each one is in God's eyes. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, **now I realize what we all are.** And if only everybody could realize this! **If only they could all see themselves as they really are.** But it cannot be explained. **There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."**

A revelation had been given to Merton and it transformed him. Have you ever had such an experience where the dream of separateness, between you and me and all of creation, vanishes; where heaven and earth meet; where the illusory separation between secular and sacred evaporates; a place where the separation between this world and the eternal, as the Celts say, is a thin place? For Merton Fourth and Walnut in downtown Louisville was a thin place.

Mt. Tabor in Galilee was a thin place for Peter, James, and John, and for me as well. The view from the top of Mt. Tabor was absolutely magnificent on the day we ascended the winding switchback road. The sky was crystal blue and the fields below were patchwork green. And then we entered the silence of the chapel built by the Franciscans in the 1920's. Beautiful arched naves displayed the transcendent experience of the Transfiguration, when a dazzlingly clothed Jesus was flanked by Moses and Elijah.

In that space, whether this was the actual mount or not where the Transfiguration occurred, heaven and earth met for me, for the divine mystery we call God was palpable. Just, as palpable as the Divine mystery was as I was overwhelmed by the glorious nature of everyone present in a Greek Orthodox chapel in Nazareth and on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, where on that post resurrection morning he said to Peter, "Feed my sheep". During my pilgrimage in Israel in 2009, thin places where bountiful, as I heeded Elijah's charge to Elisha to be watchful, to anticipate God's in-breaking. My pilgrim experience in Israel has fueled my resolve to be ever more watchful for the evidence of God's grace and power in the now, for God is with us.

What about you? Where have you experienced a thin place; in this sanctuary, by the sea, or in a mountain meadow, or on State Street? Where do you see evidence of God's grace and power breaking in to the ordinary every day places of your life? Where do you experience God breaking in and revealing God's self in a new way to you?

I remember sitting in my office with a man during my first call. He had come to share with me his desires for his memorial service. He was concerned about his health and he knew it would be too difficult to have this conversation with his wife, so he shared his thoughts with me. Yet, what I remember most vividly about our conversation was not his shared plans, but his description of a recent thin place for him.

It happened one Sunday morning in our sanctuary as we were worshipping and like Merton, he saw radiant light shining from all who were gathered. He experienced light radiating from himself, for the words of God through the prophet Isaiah became so very real for him. He knew for the first time this truth, that he was incredibly precious in God's sight, that he was deeply honored by God and loved beyond measure by God. Yet a hint of sadness welled up within, for he shared, "O that I would have known this years ago!" Yet, he didn't stay mired in

his sadness long for he turned to the now and said, "But I know now," and I will live every precious moment in this truth. This man didn't die in the coming weeks as he suspected, but he lived another three years. And he remained alert and awake to God's grace and power. What a privilege it was for me to journey with this man. His sharing of his thin place that day became a thin place for me.

Yet, Jesus isn't particularly interested in the monuments we think we should build, for Jesus doesn't want us to calcify or memorialize our experiences of heaven meeting earth whether it happened this morning in this sanctuary or thirty years ago at a camp retreat. Jesus desires for us a living faith, a faith that engages the power and presence of God in the present moment.

Merton said at the corner of 4th and Walnut, a bustling intersection of daily business where people scurried from place to place, "I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes." Are you able to see yourself as God sees you, "precious, honored and loved?" Are you able to see others as God sees them where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach? Where others are shining like the sun?

God has gathered us together in all of our diversity to worship this morning and I wonder if we will dare to share with each other how the divine reality of the God whom we worship and serve has moved us, shaped us, changed us? Will we set aside our fears and commit to journeying with each other, as Elisha and Elijah did? Will we begin to share our stories of thin places, where the separation between heaven and earth has momentarily lifted? Will we dare to be ever watchful with each other, trusting that God is really with us and that God desires for us more than we can ask or imagine, for God knows who we truly are?

My twin sons at the tender age of four came home from preschool one day and announced with conviction, Chris Cagnolotti said, "God lives way up there." My response to them was what do you think? They paused and looked at each other and then in unison said, "God lives in ours heart."

Friends, God is with us, the question for us this morning is, "Are we awake to this reality?" Do we live as if a thin place, where heaven and earth and the eternal and present coexist, can happen anywhere at any time?

"From the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'" Are we listening? Are we watchful? Do we anticipate in-breakings of the divine reality here and now? If we do, then I believe thin places will abound, for heaven on earth is what we pray for each and every Sunday! Amen.