

Sunday of the Transfiguration
Grace Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
February 14, 2021

2 Kings 2:1-15
Psalm
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

They say that timing is everything. We know that in music – imagine the dramatic clash of the cymbals that comes a second too soon. We know that in sports – the hail Mary pass thrown just a second too late. We know that in photography when we try to capture that amazing smile of our little one. We know that when we see the yellow light turning pink. Timing.

The liturgical year is the way that the Church marks time. And today is an important day in the liturgical year. Today is Transfiguration Sunday – it is the last Sunday before Lent, the end of the Sundays after Epiphany. Transfiguration an in-between time -- between Christmas and Easter. As one writer put it, it is halfway between the Gloria of Christmas and the Alleluia of Easter.

Halfway. We all know the importance of halfway points – especially in any kind of significant endeavor. Halfway through – that point where we might need the most encouragement, that point where we wonder if we can really complete the journey. Maybe the spot where we take a deep breath to persevere. The novelty of a new beginning has worn off and the exhilaration of a destination reached seems a long ways off. Halfway.

Not only is Transfiguration Sunday halfway between December Christmas and April Easter, but the transfiguration event itself is at a halfway point – halfway between Jesus' Baptism and his resurrection. Two very glorious times in Jesus' life – two high points. But, two high points with a lot of ordinariness and even lows in between.

The time between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection is the time of Jesus' earthly ministry – that three-year period that he walked the earth, teaching and healing and caring and loving. A fully human life lived fully by Jesus, the word of God incarnate. And right in the middle of his earthly ministry comes this mountaintop event – literally an event that took place on top of a high mountain.

Jesus gathered up Peter and James and John and brought them up to this mountain apart from all the other “stuff” of life. And there it was – in a moment in time – that Jesus was transfigured before the disciples. Transfigured and his being turned a dazzling white – brighter than anything that could be imagined. And the disciples were wrapped up into this amazing thing and for once, perhaps the first and only time in his life, Peter was speechless. And then came that voice – the one that they heard at Jesus' baptism speaking once again; speaking the same words once again. “This is my Son, the Beloved.” Words for Jesus to hear. Words for the disciples to hear. Important words at the halfway point of Jesus' ministry. And then the voice continued – Listen to him.

And then just as suddenly as this all came about, it all passed and they came down off the mountain back to the other disciples, back to the towns and villages, back to the crowds. Back to work. Same ol' same ol'. But things were fundamentally different weren't they.

They had come to one of those “thin places”– those places where the veil between time and eternity, between here and heaven, between us and God, is especially thin such that we can actually feel a bit of what it is like. Those thin places that when experienced can go such a long way to sustain us; that thin place where the presence of Jesus is so very, very real to us.

Our Old Testament reading also has a half-way point and also a thin place as its focus. This

halfway point isn't about one singular journey but is more like a turning point. The prophet Elijah – the first great prophet of God, called to speak the word of the Lord – will soon be taken into heaven – and those imagination-defying chariots of fire will enter the scene.

Elijah had an apprentice, if you will. One who has been chosen to succeed him – the prophet Elisha. Elisha has spent time with Elijah, working as his servant, learning from him, traveling with him. And now at this culmination, Elijah tells him the time is soon, I will be taken from you. So tell me what I can do for you before I go. And they talk and the time comes for Elijah to be taken and Elisha sees the chariots of fire and Elijah is gone and Elisha cries out at what he has seen – Look! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen! And then Elisha is bereft. He is at a turning point and the next thing that he does is pivotal and determinative. Elisha picks up the mantle from Elijah. And in so doing, he accepts the responsibility of carrying on the work of the great prophet. In so doing, Elisha's life is changed.

We each have experienced those times in our lives – those times when we say Yes to something or No to something. Those times when we too must pick up a mantle and carry on. A mantle that may be heavy or difficult. But it is ours to assume nonetheless. And in picking it up we are changed.

In many respects we here at Grace are like Elisha. We have walked with the giants in faith who came before us -- whether in this family of faith or another. We have received the faith from them and as they are gone, it is up to us to pick up the mantle, the authority, the responsibility and carry on what they had begun. It's a turning point. Like Elisha we can cling on to Elijah and say as Elisha did: "As the Lord lives, I will not leave you" – which really meant "don't leave me!"

Like Peter, we might say – "Lord this is really terrific – how about if I build three tents here and we can just hang out here."

But that is not what we have been called to do. We have been called to pick up the mantle of those who came before us to continue doing the work of God, to continue loving God's people, to keep on being the hands and feet and heart and voice of Christ in the world around us. We have been called to bear witness that the Kingdom of God has come into God's world.

That is not always easy work nor a simple task. And so it is that mid-way in our weekly journeys and lives, we gather together, albeit virtually, to remember who and whose we are, to receive a word of encouragement from each other and from the Lord, to pray together and to enter into a thin place where we can really see Jesus.

Madeleine L'Engle writes this:

Suddenly they saw him the way he was,
the way he really was all the time,
although they had seen it before,
the glory which blinds the everyday eye
and so becomes invisible. This is how
he was, radiant, brilliant, carrying joy
like a flaming sun in his hands.

This is the way he was—is—from the beginning,
and we cannot bear it. So he manned himself,
came manifest to us; and there on the mountain
they saw him, really saw him, saw his light.

We all know that if we really see him we die.

Then, perhaps, we will see each other, too.

Recall these three verses that follow the Old Testament reading:

Elisha picked up the mantle of Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah and struck the water. When he had struck the water, the water was parted and Elisha went over. And the company of the prophets saw this from a distance and said, “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.”

Like Elisha, let us pick up the mantle and continue.

Amen.