

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Holding on to Alleluia

2 Kings 2:1-12

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At a certain point in the middle of 2 Corinthians, St. Paul feels the need to remind his readers who he's talking about. As if maybe they'd forgotten. "Our ministry is not about ourselves," he insists. In everything we do and say we are talking about Jesus Christ. "it is the God who said "light will shine out of darkness" who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." There's a whole series of conjunctions in that sentence:

It is the God who said, "light will shine out of darkness"
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There's a lot going on, at least in my translation. Eugene Peterson's The Message smooths it out in English.:

*Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus to you.
It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful."*¹

As dense as is the passage, the message is clear. God shines, and God shines in the darkness. On the day we celebrate the transfiguration of Christ, the event we remember was recalled by the disciples who were there as a bright light shining unlike anything they'd ever seen or imagined. At the transfiguration, they were almost blinded by divine light. Like the light of bleached white clothes; like the sun at midday—they were grasping for ways to describe it—like the light that flooded in the beginning and infused creation with illumination and God's inner light.

Light, from the beginning... light, in the glory of Christ, shines. And it shines in the darkness.

The few disciples taken up on the mount with Jesus were given a gift unlike anything they'd ever experienced and unlike anything most people ever experience. But some people do, sometimes; and it's always a gift of grace when any person has a mystical experience by which they see with a penetrating vision to the glory of God. For the disciples, the vision, the experience became

¹ see MSG 2 Cor 4.3-6

known as the transfiguration, when Jesus appeared in divine glory. They were entranced; they were inspired; they were speechless. And they never forgot it.

Those moments stay with you. If you have one or two transcendent, mystical moments maybe in your life, you are blessed beyond measure. I think of it like the solar eclipse phenomenon that will come right over our heads in a couple of months from now. I heard it said an astronomer wouldn't cross the street for a partial eclipse, but for a full eclipse, she would go across the world. When you've experienced the real thing, nothing else will do, and you know the difference. And you hunger for it the rest of your life. How much more when the experience is not just the dance of moon and sun, but the immanence of God? Not just passing by over your head, but coming right to your heart.

Our hymn this morning, speaks of this:

*Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all praise we would render, O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.*

It's only the splendor of light that hides God. It's as if to say that God's light is so bright that it's the only thing that veils our eyes from seeing God's essence.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples were blinded by light and shrouded in a cloud. They experienced light and darkness. They were unable to see and only then were they able to really see. Does that make sense? It's an irony. Only when our eyes are closed are they opened. Only when we are in the dark, are we enabled to see the light. The disciples want to hold on to this moment as long as they possibly can. It comes into a difficult time in their own lives. I mean, when you've been told "Get behind me, Satan," these are not the best moments in life. They're beginning to understand the fraught nature of their discipleship. They're dealing with their own doubts and disbeliefs and separation from their families. There are troubles swirling around them. And to them, then in this moment comes this manifestation of divine presence. Of course they want to hold onto it as long as they possibly can.

God's light when things are going great is one thing; God's light when times are hard and there's grief and sorrow, when you feel alone or like a failure; God's light shining in times of emotional or spiritual darkness is something else entirely. It's glory, and it's grace.

Today's Old Testament story is about this kind of experience, about glory coming into grief. A person is in the dark or in the cloud, if we put it that way. We see Elisha, knowing he's in the last days, even the last hours with his spiritual father, friend, and mentor, Elijah. If you don't know these two biblical characters with their similar names very well, the part we read this morning can be kind of baffling.

The story ends with Elijah taken up by chariots and horses of fire and a whirlwind to heaven, but most of the story isn't about that, as amazing as that is. And it is amazing. Nothing prepares you

for it. Elijah, the great prophet taken from the earth in this majestic way. The only one in the Bible taken to God without dying.

Given who Elijah was, it's kind of hard to imagine him dying anyway. In 1 Kings 17, he just appears with no birth story. He just appears as if he's only here for two reasons: to destroy false prophets and aggravate King Ahab, and he finishes off the prophets right at the start. Elijah was the thorn in the side of Ahab and his wife Jezebel for a long, long time.

Ahab was a bad king, fueled by Jezebel. He stole land when he wanted it for himself. He used people for his own benefit. He lied and cheated and abused his office. He was unfit to be king. But he was king. And he made the worst of it. In Elijah's eyes, his worst offense and the root of every other sin was that he wasn't faithful to Yahweh, Israel's God. Elijah's name means, "Yahweh is my God." And he lives out his name.

In these two towering figures Ahab and Elijah and their associates Jezebel and Elisha, you have a microcosm and preview of the life of Israel for generations to come. Ahab: The tendency of powerful people to use power to abuse land, people, and faith for their own purposes. And Elijah: God's prophetic voice, thundering and pestering and preaching, reminding people in power they have a higher responsibility to protect the vulnerable. Ahab once called Elijah "the troubler of Israel." Elijah responded: I've not made trouble for Israel, but you have. I'm here to make trouble for you.

Other prophets would follow after him, but Elijah was the first. He was larger than life, seemingly able to control drought and rain, call down fire from heaven, raise the dead, feed the hungry. Many miracles Jesus performs echo those Elijah did centuries before. He was huge. And his chosen follower was Elisha, whose name means "My God saves."

Our reading this morning is the passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha as Elijah is taken to heaven in chariots of fire and horses and a whirlwind. But the story really isn't mostly about that event of light and mystery and wonder. It's not about the light of glory enfolding the great prophet. The narrative kind of takes that in stride. Most of the chapter is instead about the experience of the one left behind, about Elisha who knows he is walking on sacred ground. He is walking in sacred time and this moment will not last for long. He's grieving because he knows Elijah will soon be taken from him. While Elijah is rather emotionless, Elisha is sad; the kind of anticipatory grief experienced when you know something good is about to end, and you want to hold on to every second of it while it still lasts. It's that bittersweet experience, and he's living in it and wants nothing to take his focus from it. Like the disciples at the Transfiguration, who want to build little tents for everybody to hold on to this as long as they possibly can before it's gone. Like a bride and a groom, staring in one another's eyes, saying their vows. Like holding vigil at the deathbed of a beloved one. Like any moment in life when the membrane between heaven and earth is especially thin.

Elijah just tells him to go back home. Elisha says, "No, As the Lord lives and as long as you live, I will not leave you." Other people tell him, "You know this is the end, right?" He says, "Of course

I know, now hush.” The two of them went on, from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River and then into the wilderness, reversing the ancient itinerary of Israel’s entry into the promised land. Back across the Jordan River into the wilderness, alone, just the two of them, Elijah says the one tender thing he ever says to Elisha, “What may I do for you?” With audacity, Elisha asks, “Give me a double share of your spirit.”

Elijah responds, “It’s not mine to give. But if you see me taken from you, then it’s yours.” If you see the light in the darkness, if you see glory through the tears and find God when you’re alone, then you are blessed beyond measure.

While they were walking and talking in the wilderness, chariots and horses of fire and a whirlwind. Elisha kept his eyes and his entire focus on Elijah as long as he could until he could no longer see him. And then he fell down and wept.

A group of 50 men went on a hunting expedition for Elijah after all of that. They hunted every hill and under every bush in the wilderness, thinking that maybe that whirlwind picked him up and set him down like Dorothy somewhere. He was not to be found. For 3 days they looked for him until they were exhausted and convinced he was really gone this way.

But from that day, when someone would stand on the banks of the river and look over to the other side into the wild, wild west of the wilderness, the spiritual darkness of no-man’s land, they would whisper the story about Elijah and the whirlwind and chariots of fire. They would whisper about a day when they believed Elijah would return, and when he did, the messiah was coming with him. They waited, and they waited.

Prophets waited and waited for generations, even as they took up the mantle of God’s righteousness and justice against power. They took it from Elijah to Elisha and on and on. And as they preached hope in the darkest of days. Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Obadiah, Hosea and Zechariah, and Malachi. We wait; we work. We hope; we try to be faithful. We keep our eyes on God anywhere we can catch a glimpse.

They waited, and they waited.

And then, in that same wilderness, John appeared, baptizing for the repentance and for the forgiveness of sins. Everyone went out there to see about this. John had one message above all: I’m here to preach truth to power to power and make way for the Messiah. And I’m just about done talking. The one greater than me is coming. I can see him now. Shining like the sun, shining like the Son of God.

God’s light shining in our darkness will be sorely tested in the coming days. In Lent time, the light dims and darkness looms, and it mirrors what any of us may experience in our own spirits at any time, in any season of life. We are headed to a time when it will seem that all the light in the world has gone out, and we are left alone and lost. And we know then and there to wait and hope, and pray. And there, we bury our Allelujahs.

This morning, we heard Allelujah sung by the choir. It will be the last time you hear those words until that day to come. I've asked the choir to come at the end of our service (The choir is just now hearing this...). By their grace, the choir will come back at the end of our service and let us hear those words one more time, and let us soak in them. Let us soak in those words, in praise to God, it will be the last time we hear that word for forty days.

We enter into the season of darkness now, we follow in the steps of Jesus, and we wait and we hope and we pray until we go to the tomb early in the morning, our eyes focused like nothing else to see if the stone is rolled away and if he is indeed risen.

On this day, we catch a glimpse of Jesus transfigured in glory. It is a foretaste. And Elijah is with him. If you can see, if you can catch a glimpse, if you can ever get a taste, if you can ever hear a whisper, hold on to it as long as you can. These gifts are rare and they stay with you like a lamp for the path that you walk in this life.

Always and forevermore, Thanks be to God.

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