

Recognizing Glory
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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 any more, 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.

Have you seen the new Salesforce Tower in San Francisco? I haven't seen it up close, first hand, but I've seen it from afar. You can't really miss it. From many of the trails in Marin, the pyramid shaped building that once distinguished the San Francisco skyline, the Transamerica building, is blocked because of the new skyscraper, the Salesforce Tower which is now by far the tallest building in SF, dwarfing even the formerly tallest Bank of America building.

I've decided it doesn't do any good for anyone, especially me, if every time I hike I remind myself how much I dislike the Salesforce building, and lambast it with my hiking partners. It is likely not going away anytime soon, God willing. So I've decided to embrace it. And now, when I see it, I replace the former negative thoughts with positive ones – look how tall! Look at that interesting shape, how creative! I imagine my kids' friends who have interned there and have secured jobs there, and I bless the building and all who work in it. Thank you, Salesforce Tower, thank you for the jobs you have created for our community! Peace be with you!

My hikes are much more pleasant now, as are my drives across the Golden Gate Bridge and travels through San Francisco. You know, from certain angles, the Transamerica building can still be seen. It hasn't disappeared. The skyline has changed, yes it has, and it represents a new era in our city. And I've chosen to welcome the new skyline as one of hope.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday after the Epiphany (the season celebrating the revelation of God in Jesus Christ) and the last Sunday before Lent, which begins this Wednesday with Ash Wednesday. And I find that just like I was at first with the construction of the changing skyline in San Francisco, I'm resistant, and a bit distraught.

I'm not quite ready to jump today from Mark 1, where we've been reading chronologically about Jesus' ministry this year, to Mark 9 where Jesus starts heading to the cross. I want to linger at the beginning of Mark, read about the healings and feedings and justice making and all the wonderful things Jesus does for the people. It seems too soon to start thinking about the cross again already!

But, alas, like the construction of the Salesforce Tower, the development of the lectionary cycle and calendar year of the church is not really about me and my needs to stay comfortable. And so, today, we forgo what could have been a reading about another healing in Mark 1 if only the moon would have just waited another week to be full.

The moon determines how the date of Easter is set each year. Easter is always the first Sunday after the full moon occurring on or after the March equinox, the first day of spring in our Northern Hemisphere, March 20 or 21st, which is when the day and night are nearly equal in length. Easter will always fall on a Sunday between March 22 and April 25. The last Sunday of Epiphany is counted seven Sundays

before that. This year, Easter falls on April 1st, and thus, the last Sunday before Lent is today, February 11th.

And Easter is what Jesus prepares for in today's gospel reading. Jesus shows a premonition of God's glory up on the mountaintop in the text today. There are 2 mountaintops that are considered the probable place where this transfiguration may have taken place. One is a Mount Tabor, a mountain seen from Nazareth in the Jezreel Valley of Galilee, standing at 1,886 feet, about 700 feet lower than our own Mount Tamalpais (and about 800 feet higher than the Salesforce Tower). The other and perhaps more probable location of the transfiguration is Mount Hermon, straddling Israel-occupied Golan Heights, Syria and Lebanon, and is the tallest mountain in the region at 7,336 feet. It today boasts Israel's only ski resort.

Last week, we spoke about how the disciple Simon is later given the name Peter by Jesus, and so today, that name-giving has already happened and the Peter in today's reading is the same man Simon from last week. Peter, James and John are led up to a high mountain with Jesus.

The gospel of Mark continually portrays the disciples as never quite understanding what's really going on, and this passage is one of them. Here, Jesus is transfigured before the disciples, his clothes turning dazzling white, and suddenly Elijah and Moses appear with him. Peter is terrified, so he interrupts and suggests building some holy temples for them, and a voice from a cloud calls out, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

It somewhat reminds me of when the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion go with Dorothy to visit the Wizard of Oz and the voice from the fiery flames bellows to the group, "The great Oz has spoken!" This is when Toto pulls back the curtain to expose the great Oz as just a simple man; similarly, after the voice from the cloud speaks, Jesus is there by himself, exposed for who he really is: God's Son, the Beloved, to whom his disciples must listen.

The text implies that Peter is rash and reckless by interrupting Jesus in the momentous occasion, when Moses and Elijah, the symbols of the Law and Prophets of Israel, are there with him. But I'm like Peter. I want to linger here at the mountaintop. Stay in Epiphany a little longer, like I said -- please, with the beautiful vistas and views of God's glory!

Elisha in the Old Testament passage wants to linger with Elijah, and not stay back alone without him when Elijah is called to other place to serve the Lord. The people, the company of the prophets, ask Elijah, "Are you aware that today is the day Elijah will be taken away?" and he responds, "Yes, I am, stop reminding me, keep silent." Elijah tells Elisha three times that he's being sent to other places, and Elisha responds, "I will not leave you." He knows the day is coming when his mentor will leave him.

The day is today in our reading, and Elisha wants to hold on to Elijah while he has the chance. Alas, the moment comes, when the two are separated by a chariot of fire and horses of fire, and Elijah ascends in a whirlwind to heaven. Elijah tells Elisha if he sees him being taken from him, then Elisha's wish of inheriting a double share of Elijah's spirit will be granted. Hmm. Elisha must face the separation in order to receive the blessing. Elisha must face that Elijah will not remain forever with him in this way. Still, when Elisha no longer sees Elijah, after he is whirl-winded up into heaven, he's not thinking about the double portion of blessing. Elisha desperately grasps and tears his clothes, in a symbol of grief. Tearing things in two.

It was a momentous occasion for Elisha. I want to acknowledge that last week I spoke about an exercise of writing down our most memorable moments of our lives to discern our values. I made a mistake of saying that these were to be joyful events. Our most memorable events are not necessarily joyful. In fact, the second moment on my list was one of tremendous pain and grief. But the moment held a type of glory for me, because it was filled with enormous power and depth.

We read in the gospel passage that the disciples are terrified up on the mountain when Jesus is transfigured, and that Elisha tears his clothes in two in grief as Elijah is whisked away up to heaven, yet both are also moments of magnificent glory. So it is not joy we are going for in the exercise mentioned last week, but more-so "glory." These can even be ordinary places and ordinary times, like having a family dinner, because sometimes these are our most meaningful occasions.

Sometimes they're more extraordinary. This weekend at the Opening Ceremony for the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea, athletes from North Korea and South Korea marched together under a unified flag. This was a momentous occasion. The Olympic Korean Peninsula Declaration grants permission for 22 North Korean athletes to participate in sports along with their South Korean counterparts. For the first time in Olympic history, the women's hockey team will be called simply, Korea. Given recent tensions, the declaration was a welcome sign of hope for peace and better relations in the Korean peninsula.

Over the next two weeks in PyeongChang, top athletes from across the globe gather to compete for gold, silver and bronze medals. The Olympic Games, however, don't keep track of medal totals and don't publicize them as an official statistic. There is no official recognition of the leading countries at the end of the games.

Instead, according to the Olympic Charter, the Olympic ideal "is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity." The Olympic spirit focuses on competition as a means of being together as a world community, embodied by the Olympic symbol of five rings. The rings symbolize the five continents, with the Americas, North and South, combined as one. The rings are

interlocked as a sign of unity while maintaining the diversity of different colors, representing the colors of the national flags of the world.

Jesus tells the disciples as they head back down the mountain not to tell anyone what they saw until after the Son of Man is risen from the dead. Jesus was not focused on promoting himself or his followers to positions of power or prestige at any point in his life. Rather, he came to point through and beyond himself to God and God's coming reign on earth and to invite his followers to find their voice in bearing witness to this liberating God of transformation. So it is in an Olympic spirit of unification, peace and dignity, the gospel of Mark emphasizes Jesus' persistent attempts to keep his divinity hidden.

At the congregational meeting today we will look at the budget and behold our financial health. We will review the Annual Report and the amazing things that our small congregation does for one another and the world. We will be honoring and celebrating God's glory, like the brilliant light of Christ on the mountaintop. Look how he shines!

And we must do this. We must honor and celebrate God's work through us, the rays of light cast out from Redwoods Church. We take the time to honor and celebrate our efforts today with an awesome salad luncheon upon which to feast and nourish. It is important to recognize these bright moments.

And then, like the disciples in the passage, we must trek back down the mountain and face the needs among us: the people who are sick, dying, hungry, lonely, desperate, jobless, homeless. We must do things we'd rather put off because we'd rather not have to face it, like installing special quick-lock bolts for the school classroom doors downstairs in the case of an intruder, and setting up a defibrillator in our building for the case of an emergency heart failure.

We will update our facility to meet the city codes in the case of a wildfire. The Baltimore Park Neighborhood Response Group met with us in September to ask if our church would be an evacuation site for our area, adding that there would probably never need to be an evacuation here but would we one be "just in case?" Only a couple of weeks later, the fires hit Sonoma, mere miles away. Our church wasn't needed this time, but it may be needed someday.

Transfiguration moments are important, they are crucial to celebrate and remember, because we will need to draw upon them when we are tempted to lose hope. When we are faced with what we would prefer not to face. The disciples will be confronted with the assassination of their friend, Jesus, and they will remember the glory on the mountaintop. The Winter Olympics of 2018 will end in two weeks, and Korea will have to face their political divisions. They will remember that they were able to stand together as one under one flag. By recognizing God's glory in transfiguration moments, we remember that we have seen the light and peace of a

bright, sunny day. We have seen the face of Christ. We have been to the mountaintop. And because of this, when things are rough, or don't seem right, we are able to hope for, work for, and believe in a greater day. There is glory even in the dark moments.

In conclusion, it was brought to my attention that the founder of Salesforce, Marc Benioff, is a top donor in San Francisco, a philanthropist and champion of public education, children's health, ocean protection, and equality for all people. He is the author of books including, *Compassionate Capitalism: How Corporations Can Make Doing Good an Integral Part of Doing Well* and *The Business of Changing the World: 20 Great Leaders on Strategic Corporate Philanthropy*. More reasons to appreciate the tower.

Like the symbol of the Olympic rings that are a celebration of unity, so our annual reports are a celebration of unity in our endeavors. The good news for us today is that there are symbols and signs of God's glory among us and around us. We need only open our eyes and hearts and let the light in, that we may experience the hope, wonder and awe that God continually provides. Amen.