

Sermon February 11, 2018 Transfiguration

[2 Kings 2:1-12, Psalm 50:1-6, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9](#)

The Transfiguration gospel is placed very carefully in the liturgy. It comes *today* because we are about to enter the most important and most holy time of the year, the time when it matters most what we do, the time when all the resources of our faith are standing ready for us. We can choose to take them up and grow in the Spirit. Or we can let Lent pass us by.

The Transfiguration stands in a tradition of Old Testament mountaintop experiences. “Theophanies” they are called. Moments when God reveals himself, speaking to someone in a time of need or crisis or change to a person who really *wants* to hear.

The most obvious mountaintop connection is to the story of Moses receiving, on Mt. Horeb, the stone tablets containing the law, the Ten Commandments. This is, obviously, a foundational story in the history of Israel. It is more than full of inspiration and is definitely worthy of extensive study, reflection, and prayer. It comes from the ‘desert time,’ the forty years during which the Hebrew people wandered in the desert after their flight out of Egypt across the Red Sea, and before they entered the promised land under Joshua.

But another Old Testament mountaintop experience is referenced in the Transfiguration of Jesus as well, and that is the one I want to focus on today. Hundreds of years after the face of Moses shone on Mt. Horeb in the presence of the Lord, the great wonder worker and prophet Elijah returned there in a time of corruption, difficulty, and persecution, wondering what he should do next. He was seeking guidance, wisdom, God. His story provides a reference point for all of us who are faithful enough, trusting enough to bring the real questions and difficulties of our own life story to God, in full sincerity, and to wait patiently for the answer. People have always struggled with this. How to ask? How to know if there has been answer? How long to wait? Should I bother? How could God possibly speak to me? Elijah's experience on the mountain has provided answers to generations of those who seek the mind of God.

The context is that of a conflict between Elijah and the king, Ahab, and his wife Jezebel over the faithfulness of Israel to Jahweh. Although the name Jezebel is most infamous in popular culture in association with sexual promiscuity and "feminine wiles," there is really much more to it than that. The biblical story in 1Kings is layers deep in political and social complexity. The essence of the conflict with Elijah is that the Queen, Jezebel, is a Phoenician, a foreigner who has brought with her from her home in Tyre the worship of foreign gods and goddesses. Worst of all, King Ahab has joined her in that worship.

Since their entry into the promised land centuries before, the Jewish people had been surrounded by people like Jezebel who followed the Canaanite religion. There were always some who were tempted by it. Images of sexual promiscuity, prostitution, and faithlessness abound in bible passages describing the temptation of the people to wander away from Jahweh to neighbouring gods, “small g.”

The two religions stood in profound contrast. Judaism was and is *monotheistic*, worshipping one God who is beyond the human, is of no specific gender, is the one and only God from before time, and is therefore God of all things.

Canaanite religion was *polytheistic*, worshipping many different gods, ‘the Baals and the Asherahs,’ masculine and feminine gods with various specific portfolios: rain, wind, thunder, fire, agriculture, fertility, and the like. As the worship of these gods often involved the worship of idols, literally small statues thought to be the gods in themselves, the Jewish people considered this worship literally idolatrous. It is likely that Jezebel brought a specific form of this religion common in Tyre and Sidon and focusing on the god Melqart who is associated with storms and wind. Asserting the superiority of her god, Jezebel has killed the prophets of Jahweh with Ahab’s assent

In response, Elijah has done something well meaning but horrible. In *his* zeal to prove the superiority of God, *he* has killed the prophets of Baal with *his* sword, about four hundred and fifty of them.

Elijah has not yet had the benefit of The Transfiguration. He is still in the *old way*. He, and humanity in general, has not yet seen that the power of the one God is not in the sword, but in the heart. This is where Peter and James and John are on the mountain near Caesarea Philippi. They want to build little huts and have Jesus stay with them there in the *old way* of Elijah and Moses which is about killing off the opposition, not making peace with it, and certainly *not* about dying to it.

I want to be clear here that I am *not* criticizing or condemning Moses and Elijah here. They helped us all to take big steps toward the revelation of the true God who is completely without violence or darkness. The old testament records very plainly and courageously that they were faithful but they were not *there* yet. Nor are we. The Transfiguration is still in the future for us. Perhaps we can take a step toward it today.

The obvious response of Jezebel to Elijah, is to threaten *further* retaliation. Elijah is worried about that. Facing what he believes is the annihilation of his people, he goes back to Mt. Sinai, also called Horeb, where Moses had been. Elijah is the only person

the bible records as returning there, to the one place where God has been *known* to speak. Here is how the King James Bible records his meeting with God:

*<sup>9</sup>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.*

*Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' <sup>10</sup>He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'*

*<sup>11</sup> He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'*

The voice from the silence has more to say to Elijah, and Elijah has more to say to God, but I am going to stop there because I

think it is the most helpful place for *us* to be right now. Here is that moment again, this time from the King James version:

*after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: <sup>12</sup>And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. <sup>13</sup>And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?*

It is that 'still small voice' I invite us all to listen for in Lent. As we prepare for Easter over the next six weeks, consider doing a bit of spring cleaning for your soul. Lent is a wonderful opportunity to get a fresh start. Find times and place where you can have complete solitude. Nobody around. No distractions. Nobody to look after. Nothing electronic to play with. Turn off the lights even. Some might light a candle or use an icon, if that helps. Or go be out in an actual cave or beach or forest or mountain top if you've got one. Wrap your face in your mantle and stand at the mouth of the cave with Elijah. Invite stillness and listening into your body and your heart. You might find it quite different from the familiar frenzy and pace of urban living. Listen for the still small voice. If it doesn't come that day, try again the next. Listen as long as you need to. Wait for the Lord. Bear in mind that He won't be in the storm wind or the earthquake or the fire but in the sound of sheer silence. You may need to be very still to hear it.

The voice is easily missed, it is so still and small. It is probably speaking to us now. When you hear it you will know the answer to this question: "What are you doing here Elijah?"