

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

(Delivered on February 15, 2015)

Transfigured: Standing in the Silence and the Awe

Text: **2 Kings 2:1-12 (NRSV)**

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.

Text: **Mark 9:2-9 (The Message)**

Six days later, three of them did see it. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus.

Peter interrupted, "Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let's build three memorials—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.

Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: "This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him."

The next minute the disciples were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus, only Jesus.

Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. “Don’t tell a soul what you saw. After the Son of Man rises from the dead, you’re free to talk.” They puzzled over that, wondering what on earth “rising from the dead” meant.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Transfigured: Standing in the Silence and the Awe”**

(A short scene, written and acted by Pastor Donald)

EMILY: What’s all this I hear about
Transubstantiation Sunday?

ME: No, Emily, it’s not about transubstantiation. That’s more about certain people’s belief that the bread and the wine at Communion actually become Christ flesh and blood for us to consume.

EMILY: Well, that just sounds gross.

ME: Now Emily...

EMILY: Well then what is this? Transportation Sunday? A day where we just really are supposed to get going?

ME: No, you still haven’t quite hit the mark, but you’re getting closer. What happened to Jesus was something that really got his disciples going and calls all of us into a changing of our hearts and minds.

EMILY: Oh, I get it – this is Transformation Sunday.

ME: Well, I don’t think you’re going to get any closer than that. It’s Transfiguration Sunday.

EMILY: Oh, well... why didn’t you just say so in the first place?!

(and SCENE)

I’m sure most of us can identify with our dear friend Emily Litella in our little opening scene for today as we try to figure out what in the world this Transfiguration Sunday is all about. I, for one, was quite transmogrified myself this week as I delved into these two fascinating accounts of mysterious and otherworldly goings on in our two scripture passages Keith read so well for us today.

I’m often filled with wonder as I explore these holy stories and realize how God can be seen speaking and working throughout both the Hebrew and Greek scriptures in such similar ways. Even though centuries upon centuries separate the accounts we have in today’s readings, we can note the way God lifts up those who have climbed the mountain and changes them and us forever.

In both cases today we can see ourselves in the stories, whether we be the prophet’s protégé or the Holy One’s disciple, longing to know what is happening and hoping with all our might that the one we love and cherish, our friend, and our teacher, will stay with us forever and we won’t have to continue on the journey alone. “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you,” Elisha pleads again and again.

When those closest to us experience a transformation in their lives, it can be very difficult to know where we stand or what to do with ourselves as we see the person we love transfigured before us.

Peter's response is to stammer around and try to be some kind of carpenter cheerleader. "Let's build some memorials!" he blurts out. "One for each of you!" So helpful.

And then there's Elisha, who can only deny the inevitable and tell all those around him who are trying to help him face the truth to be silent. "I know. I know," he says like some petulant teenager. (No offense to our teenagers.)

Sometimes the best thing we can do when confronted with the changes happening in someone's life that we don't understand and don't want to accept is to fall silent. Go within and see what God is trying to tell us through this experience. "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind," Paul says in Romans 12.

It's so easy to get caught up in the fear and the awe of the unknown that we lose sight of the thing that God wants us to experience RIGHT NOW. Allowing our ego to run rampant, we miss the message and get distracted by the fearful fireworks exploding all around us.

The only way Elisha is going to get a heaping helping of what Elijah has; a "double share of his spirit" as he puts it, is to truly open his eyes; to stand and see what's happening; to be in the moment and be aware of what's happening. No denial allowed. No false idols created. No half truths to soothe our souls.

I believe God is calling each of us to stand in the midst of whatever is happening to us and to deal with it honestly and with the assurance of the Grace which is always available to us if we but fall silent in our minds and our hearts and, especially, our mouths, and hear the quiet, comforting voice of the Presence that surrounds us with love. Sometimes, it's realizing that we are not in control and that we have no power over our present experience other than the power to be present that allows us to experience the grace and the mystery of God. Being open to that which we do not understand creates peace when we acknowledge our place in God's hands.

"We desperately want an encounter with God," Dr. David Lose wrote this week in his article "There is No Plan." "...some sense that we are not alone, that there is something more than what we can see and touch – and yet in those very moments that God draws near we find ourselves afraid, unsure, and feeling suddenly very out of control and so we try to domesticate our experience of the Holy by fitting it into a plan." You know, something we understand and can relate to in our humanness.

"What we have, who we are, may not be everything we want, but at least we know it, are used to it, have built a relatively orderly life around it," Dr. Lose writes. "And so when God comes – perhaps not in a transfiguration as dramatic as Mark describes but in the ordinary hopes, encounters, and tragedies of our everyday life – when God comes and unsettles the orderly lives we've constructed we try to put those disruptive experiences back into line by cramming them into a plan."

"But maybe, just maybe," he writes, "there is no plan. Maybe there's only love...[perhaps] church should not be the place we look for order and stability but rather the place we meet up to share our stories of wonder and worry and hope and disappointment and stand with each other as the God of Moses and Elijah and Jesus draws near once again to unsettle our plans and meet us in the mystery of God's love."

We can't even hope to understand what God is up to, you know.

"Just when you think you've got it all figured out, just when you finally begin to plan something, get excited about something, and feel like you know what direction you're heading in, the paths change,"

writes Cecelia Ahern in her book, "Love Rosie." "the signs change, the wind blows the other way, north is suddenly south, and east is west, and you're lost. It is so easy to lose your way, to lose direction. And that's with following all the signposts."

And this, believe it or not, is the best time and place for God to lift us up and transfigure us into the person God wants for us to be.

"We need transfiguration as much as Jesus needed to be transfigured," Luther Seminary professor Karoline Lewis wrote on her blog this week. [but] "Transformation is hard. Change is hard. Traversing from one place to another, from one way of being to another? It's easier to stay the same. Stay the course. Convince yourself that what you've always known is satisfactory and sufficient even when you have glimpsed what could be..."

This is why the transfiguration rocks. It just shows up. There is no right time. It just happens. Now what? No amount of planning can predict the right kind of change. No amount of preparation can prepare you for an altered reality or an altered perspective. No amount of strategizing can make you ready for a transfiguration to be truly a transfiguration."

Sometimes God shakes the very core of our lives to see what fruit falls out. Will you put your trust in me? Will you hold on when everything around you is changing and falling away? Into whose hands do you want to put your faith, your trust, your life?

"Elisha's salvation came in the long silence after the glory," Debie Thomas writes in her article, "When Seeing Isn't Believing." It came when he still had no idea whether Elijah's "double portion" rested on him, or not. It came when he picked up the cloak, approached the river, and did his grief-stricken best to follow in his beloved master's footsteps. Imagine battered faith, trembling faith, scorched faith. The faith that remains after the chariots leave."

To me, being transfigured means seeing in a different way. I think God calls us into different experiences and events in our lives so that we can see our lives and God's kingdom from a different perspective. When Jesus is transfigured a "light-radiant cloud" envelops all those gathered on the mountain and a voice is heard speaking the truth about Jesus' identity. To me this is about seeing Christ in a new way. The disciples had to have their physical sight removed so that they could experience the truth through the inner sight of their souls.

With Elisha, he must fully open his eyes and see the truth in a different way so that his faith may be transformed and his spirit blessed.

"What if our churches were places where we learn to see rightly? Where our plastic minds were formed so that we can begin to see reality?" Ragan Sutterfield wrote on the Ekklesia project in an article called, "Plastic Minds and Magic Eyes." "This is what we must seek. But in doing so we must be careful not to make tents on mountaintops, static preservations of divine moments. Instead we must be formed so that we see the kingdom as it is—real and always around us. This formation for seeing comes by listening, by becoming disciples and immersing ourselves in the stories and teachings of Jesus. Let us listen so we can see, let our eyes be opened, let us see the incredible reality of the kingdom of God where we no longer have to live according to the lies we used to tell ourselves. This is the work we must turn ourselves to in the Lenten season."

(continued on next page)

A poem by Ted Loder

O God of beginnings,
as your Spirit moved
 over the face of the deep
 on the first day of creation,
move with me now
 in my time of beginnings,
 when the air is rain-washed,
 the bloom is on the bush,
 and the world seems fresh
 and full of possibilities,
 and I feel ready and full.

I tremble on the edge of a maybe,
 a first time,
 a new thing,
 a tentative start,
and the wonder of it lays its finger on my lips.

In silence, Lord,
I share now my eagerness
 and my uneasiness
 about this something different
 I would be or do;
and I listen for your leading
 to help me separate the light
 from the darkness
 in the change I seek to shape
 and which is shaping me.

Amen.