

“Following...Into the Mystery”
Last Epiphany – Transfiguration of the Lord
March 11, 2018

2 Kings 2:1-12

2:1 Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 2:2 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. 2:3 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." 2:4 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. 2:5 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." 2:6 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. 2:7 Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 2:8 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. 2:9 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." 2:10 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." 2:11 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. 2:12 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.

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

4:3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4:4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 4:5 For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 4:6 For it is the God who said, "Let light 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 Jesus Christ.

Mark 9:2-9

9:2 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, 9:3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 9:4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 9:5 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." 9:6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 9:7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" 9:8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. 9:9 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.

In a region of Western NC there was a group of young people who had been gathered together to form an ecumenical committee which would be responsible for establishing a program in their communities to better understand one another and to help in general and in specifics with race and human relations. The adult leaders of this effort realized that this was a major undertaking and in viewing the diverse group of young people – Hispanics, blacks, whites, Asians, young men and young women, -- not to mention ecumenically and religiously diverse. There were young people of many denominational backgrounds chosen from their churches as possible leaders. All sorts of youth, all in high school, from 14 to 18. Leaders who had been meeting and planning and praying for almost two years determined that this small group would benefit from some sort of activity that would allow them to experience some adversity from which they could learn -- because adversity was sure to be encountered in the days to follow.

Selections were made. Permissions we sought. 24 youth were identified who all pledged and signed an agreement to fully participate in a project, which they would soon discover, would be physically, mentally, emotional and spiritually challenging. The adult leaders loaded the kids in a couple of vans and took off for the beautiful NC mountains and a specific location in the Smokies called Mt. Leconte. At almost 6600 hundred feet in altitude, ascending to the summit was a huge undertaking. Arrangements

had been made for camping and the group would have to climb to their destination with all their gear, set up camp, feed themselves and begin to discuss the task that was before them. However, all they had been told was, "Wear some good walking shoes and to be ready for a strenuous weekend." All else, where they were going, how long they would be gone, what they would actually be doing was a mystery.

Arriving at the base of the mountain what happened initially was the group being overtaken by a sense of awe at the majesty of the setting. Most had never been in this environment. Within the make up of the group there were, of course those who had climbed a little, there were those who were in fairly good condition, and some who were decidedly not. There were some who had camped, and some with no experience. Some for whom the entirety of their lives had been spent in the urban setting, and many with quick apprehension about being there at all. The leaders told them that if anyone wanted to drop out they were welcome to do so. A ride home would be provided. But peer pressure, one of the most powerful forces known in the world took over. And they were all in.

They were assigned gear to carry and told that they were going to climb the mountain and skepticism arose at their ability, to first of all climb the mountain and then survive there.

Almost immediately the group found themselves having to be just that -- a group. They discovered very soon that they were not only being

challenged individually with a predicament -- but because they were charged with a group task they had to find a way to get the whole group up the mountain and do what must be done. Experienced campers could do the 5.5 mile ascent in about 4 hours. The leaders of this expedition planned on at least 8.

Soon as the climb began, all questions of back home quickly faded. Their differences as people faded. Their backgrounds mattered less with each step they took. All that mattered was the goal -- to reach the top of that mountain, and a gritty determination to make it to the top. It took all 8 hours to do so and then some. There were bruises and uncountable blisters and many scraped knees -- but more importantly as they climbed, those who were physically stronger had helped the others and they had attained the summit.

As they rested, they were met with a most magnificent view of the valleys below. They felt small and somewhat insignificant in relation to the majesty of God's creation. Their leaders gathered them together, had a prayer to thank God for seeing them there and read the 121st Psalm -- "I look to the hills, from where will my help come -- my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth . . . "

They set up camp, fixed some supper with each of them finding things they could contribute to the good of all in their gear, and most had little trouble sleeping that night in the tents which were set up for them.

The next morning they woke to a most eery, but common experience on the top of the mountain. They were completely enveloped in a cloud. The air was thick with moisture and they could barely make out one another's forms from only a few feet away. In the clearing between the tents one of the leaders had built a fire and one by one the group was drawn to its glow. The light of the fire and its promise of warmth in the early morning chill drew these people together. Once again, like the day before on the trail their differences and divisions began to fade away and what they held in common, their humanity, their need for light and warmth, their calling to do something outside of themselves and this amazing setting created a fellowship that would later allow them to approach and complete their task with confidence. They would spend the entirety of the day sharing common and not so common life's experiences and lessons. They would be given the opportunity to begin a plan that would help in their communities below. Their mountain top endeavor, their willingness to follow in the mystery, allowed them to find what was necessary in themselves to be what they were needed to be.

Without a doubt one of the great joys of being involved in ministry is watching the mysterious process of children evolving through early adolescents to a kind of maturity that one hopes will prepare them for the life they have ahead of them. To have something to do with that process

is a privilege. To be in a church that supports that process like Highlands is a joy. It is in effect the task of raising up disciples.

That's what is taking place in our scriptures for today. From Elisha doggedly, pursuing Elisha unto he gives him a double dose of his spirit, to Paul's admonition to allow light to shine in the darkness. Then we read the transfiguration story from Mark.

As the way to the cross begins to take focus, Jesus invites Peter, James and John, the nucleus of leadership, to follow him into a mystery, up the mountain in a process through which he knows that disciples will be made. They will form the inner circle of the band of followers who will start the church. They will be the ones to take upon themselves the mantle of leadership, empowered by the Holy Spirit. They will be the ones who, experiencing the dazzling, blinding light on the mountain will "Let light shine out of darkness," ... to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

We can only imagine how strange and foreign this experience of climbing a mountain was to these fisherman. But, Jesus called and they followed. Already they have been learning, experiencing and growing in the faith and understanding of Jesus the man. The transfiguration allows them to see Jesus in a rare kind of divine light that lets them know that he is without a doubt something, someone, different and special.

Life is full of surprises. Around every corner, in every part of life, experiences of challenge and wonder await us. We only need to open ourselves for the possibility of the different, the unexpected. But the routine of life dulls our sense of awe. For far too many people the effort of living day to day is like a daily climb up a mountain. It's too easy to become too familiar, to take people and our blessings for granted, to make too many assumptions. That's why in the church the season of epiphany has been so vital. Epiphany is the season of 'aha', and 'oh my' and of hearing and witnessing things that make us go 'hmmm.' Epiphany is the season that readies us when Jesus bids us follow him into the mysteries of Lent.

And like the disciples who have lived with Jesus throughout his ministry in Galilee, just when we think we have a handle on who this Jesus is, just when we think we know what to expect, he leads us where we think we have no capacity to go, and asks us to do what we think we have no ability to do. And in the process we find ourselves in the rarified air of the mountain top – enabled by the presence and power of God to be and do what we need to be and do. Seeking our purpose and our calling.

The message of this gospel is as clear today as the air at 6500 feet when the fog lifts. When the fog of our indifference, of our apathy, or our minimal commitment, of our too little faith, is lifted because we have caught a blinding glimpse of the divine, we know that we need to open the eyes of

our faith to see. To hear, we need to listen. To experience, we need to open our minds and hearts to the possibility of God's voice. Look at the Son. Listen to his words. Open your mind and heart to his presence. We don't need to be on the top of a mountain to experience God's fullness. Just be willing to follow him and he will be there.

Up on the mountain the group made many discoveries. About self and the ability to do something you didn't think you could. About the people with you whose experience on the mountain would equip them to face challenges in the valley below. All too soon they were packing up their gear for the downward descent. They were told that the downward trail was a bit longer, but easier. A little more than half way down they found a clear mountain stream. Shoes and socks were soon shed and tire, raw, and aching feet were plunged into the icy water. Another startling experience on this startling weekend.

Along the way of our living, there is a healing stream we call baptism. Along the way there is an encounter of healing and wholeness, because along the way of our living there is Jesus, welcoming us, encouraging us, guiding us as the good shepherd...inviting us follow him. We are invited to come, to take the challenge to climb faith's mountain which opens for us the way to Lent, and to the cross, which reminds us of who we are called to be.