“Listen to him!”

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2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

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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. 2Elijah 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. 3The 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.” 4Elijah 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. 5The 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.” 6Then 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. 7Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8Then 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.***

***9When 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.” 10He 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.” 11As 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. 12Elisha 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***

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

***9As 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.***

On the way to Caesarea Philippi, after the disciples had been with Jesus for a short while, Jesus began to ask his disciples a little bit about their experiences out in the world with him. He asked for example, “Who do people say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” Some have said Elijah, because they too would have known the scripture that we acted out, from 2 Kings. It was Peter, who got it right and said, “You are the Messiah!” Then Jesus began to explain to them that he must undergo great suffering, be killed, and rise again after three days. Peter, speaking too quickly, started to argue, but Jesus said to him, “Get behind me Satan!” Jesus continued to explain some strange thing about losing one’s life in order to gain one’s life.

Six days after that, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. That’s when things began to get weird.

In order to understand that weirdness we have to understand the old testament lesson that is paired with the gospel lesson for today. And not just *that* old testament lesson. The gospels are full of references to the old testament. Many times, the reference is there to remind us that Jesus is the *fulfillment* of some of the promises from God that are told about in the stories of the old testament. Using that same thinking, the old testament reference in the new testament is also there to remind us of the *continuity* of God’s work with humanity throughout time. Jesus both fulfills *and* continues God’s hope for humanity.

The books of 1st and 2nd Kings, originally one longer book, have descriptions of the reigns of about 20 kings of Israel and Judah. The prophet Elijah chose Elisha as his successor, near the end of 1st Kings, and here at the beginning of 2nd Kings, Elijah is coming to the end of his life. He and Elisha were walking away from Gilgal, to the place where the Lord was calling to Elijah. They stopped in Bethel. Elijah urged Elisha to remain behind, but Elisha would not leave him. So they went on to Jericho. Once again, Elijah urged Elisha to remain behind, but Elisha would not leave him. So they went on, until they were standing on the banks of the Jordan. Each time they stopped, in Bethel, and in Jericho, other prophets warned Elisha that his master would be taken from him “today.” Each time, Elisha shushed them. “Yes, I know. Be silent.”

Soon, just as Moses struck the waters of the Red Sea and parted the waters to that the Israelites could cross, Elijah took off his mantle and struck the waters of the Jordan and he and Elisha crossed to the other side. There, the old prophet Elijah said to his protégé, Elisha, “what may I do for you before I am taken from you. Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” A double share of the inheritance is what the eldest son would inherit from the father, in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel. For Elisha to ask for a double share was not greed. It was a relational request. Elisha requested a double portion as a son would request from a father. Elijah told him that this would be granted to him if he was able to see Elijah as Elijah was being taken from him. As they continued walking, a dramatic scene unfolded. “A chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. **12**Elisha [was able to keep his gaze and cried out] “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!”

When he could no longer see Elijah, he cried out in grief and tore his own clothing in two, as was a usual sign of great grief. Then Elisha picked up that very same mantle that Elijah had used, and struck the Jordan again, and walked back across to where they had started. The men waiting there who had seen them cross, knew when he came back that the spirit of Elijah had fallen on Elisha.

Today, the Sunday that divides the season of Epiphany from the season of Lent, both of our scriptures together, combine to blend the past with the future. All of the season of Epiphany has been revealing something. We revealed Jesus’ humanity when the wise men came to the manger. We revealed his divinity when Jesus was baptized and Steve, I mean, a voice from heaven said “This is my Son.” Then in the synagogue Jesus’ authority was revealed, and his power was revealed when he healed Simon’s mother-in-law of her fever. Up on that mountain where Jesus took Peter and James and John, the final revelation for the season of Epiphany happened. The Glory of Jesus was revealed.

The three disciples witnessed a remarkable transfiguration of Jesus – he was glowing white – and Mark, who is usually in a hurry, manages to take the time to throw in a description of just how white – such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there was Jesus along with Moses and Elijah, two big names from the Old Testament – Moses, who gave us the religious and civil law, and Elijah who gave us the moral law – both there, signifying that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises of both of the prophets.

Astounded, Peter again, jumps in a little too soon too terrified to really know what to say, and says, hey, let’s honor all three of you! We’ll make a dwelling for each of you.

In a repeat of previous scenes, a cloud overshadowed all of them and there was a voice again, saying “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” That voice. These were the same words God said at Jesus’ baptism. This time, God added “Listen to him!” And then. Gone. Peter, James and John found themselves alone with Jesus again. I love to freeze frame in scripture sometime – like right now. What would it have been like to experience all that, and then to have it be gone. Did someone just say, well, so, um, should we just go back down the mountain now, it's time for lunch, maybe trying to pretend nothing happened because it was really just so startling. Or maybe they all stayed there an hour or so, talking about it. Either way, when they did go back down the mountain, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about what they had seen.

Remember Jesus had just been explaining to the disciples that he must undergo suffering and be killed and after three days rise again. Jesus told them then not to tell anyone what he was saying. After this strange vision up on the mountain, Jesus is telling them again, not to tell anyone.

Perhaps Jesus in Mark’s gospel didn’t think that anyone would understand what Jesus was predicting about himself, so he asked them to wait “until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead”. Maybe Jesus knew how what he was saying would push the authorities to suspect that he was up to no good, and his death would come sooner than the proper time. We are never given clues to why Jesus wanted the disciples to keep his Messianic secret. Scholars of the gospel of Mark are still debating this.

It's key that at the moment of Jesus’ glory being revealed, the season of Epiphany ends – and the season of Lent begins as the voice in the cloud on this mountain says, “Listen to him!”

*To the disciples*, Listen to what Jesus has just told you (about the Son of Man undergoing suffering, etc.). Listen to the things Jesus will continue to explain and do in the coming days.

*To us entering the season of Lent,* Listen to the scriptures read during this season of preparation for that same suffering and death that Jesus told the disciples about.

In the coming weeks we will follow Jesus as he moves closer to the cross and death on Good Friday, and fortunately for us, toward the empty cross on Easter. Lent will begin for us this week on Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, with a short service that will include the imposition of ashes. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a time when we hope to do as God told the disciples about his beloved Son this morning – Listen to him!

Amen.