

## Crossing Over

Transfiguration Sunday, Year B  
February 11, 2024

**Color:** White or Gold

- 2 Kings 2:1-12
- Psalm 50:1-6
- 2 Corinthians 4:3-6
- Mark 9:2-9

### Planning Notes:

Here we are, once again, at the cusp of a change in the season. Sometimes we treat Transfiguration as if it's the last Sunday in the season after Epiphany, a kind of exclamation point to the Ordinary Time that takes us from Epiphany to Ash Wednesday. But this year, we chose to make this a stand-alone Sunday, which is appropriate given that this day belongs not to Ordinary Time or Lent but in the liminal space between the two. This is a day of growing pains and crossing thresholds instigated by the shock of coming face-to-face with glory. In the [Old Testament](#), we have the glory of Elijah being taken up. In [Mark](#), we have the glory of Christ. In many ways, we start and end this season after Epiphany with revelations of Jesus' fully divine and fully human nature. What we first encounter at the waters of baptism is further revealed in the Transfiguration.

Yet, in both narratives, the spectacle is only part of the story. Now, that doesn't mean we need to tone down the wonder and the glory in worship. Bring out the white and gold paraments and altarscapes. Sing majestic praise to the Triune God. Pull out all the stops, whether you have an organ, a praise band, or a group of faithful disciples singing *a capella* at the top of their lungs. Throw in a few Hallelujahs if you can. We need the reminders of glory as we enter the shadows of Lent and Holy Week.

But what do the encounters with glory call Elisha, Peter, James, and John to do? What do they call *us* to do? If Jesus wouldn't let the disciples stay on the mountaintop and reminisce about the glorious sight they once encountered there, then we can't either. We have to find ways for the awe and wonder in these texts to lead us to taking up the mantle that Elijah and Jesus extend to us. Perhaps you invite the congregation to respond to the proclamation today by committing to a discipline or mission for the upcoming season of Lent. Or create a visual for the altar or another area of the worship space that is made up of many little pieces and invite the congregation to take a piece with them to remind them of the glory they've encountered and the call to carry God's glorious love out into the world.

Also consider how the energy of this day can serve as a crossing over into Lent. Perhaps you begin the gathering with a joyous call to worship and a loud, joyous hymn or song of praise, followed by a slow descent of the energy that ends with a benediction that invites the congregation to return in just a few days for Ash Wednesday. In this way, your service mirrors the experience of the disciples and of Elisha as they move from a literal and/or metaphorical mountaintop experience and descend back into the dirt—and perhaps even the ashes—of everyday life with God and with neighbor.

## Preaching Notes:

How does one preach on such magnificent and pivotal moments as the departure of Elijah or the Transfiguration of Jesus when they feel so unrelatable? Sure, they are inspiring and familiar narratives, but what kind of everyday image can both convey the splendor of the moment and move our hearers from observing the stories to responding to their invitations? What personal story can establish our interpretive credibility with our hearers while remaining faithful to the text? Perhaps the core analogy of transitions can ground our interpretation and proclamation of the events in these readings. If you choose to engage the Psalm, you might find its dramatic language helpful for communicating the gravitas of the events from the Hebrew Bible and Gospel lessons. For it speaks of God summoning the Earth in grandiose fashion and capturing the attention of the people to bring them to trial in later verses. Contrary to the traditional arrangement of readings, it might help your hearers to read this psalm in *preparation* for the narrative passage(s), instead of in response.

In each narrative passage, we find something big... something almost apocalyptic... happening to move us from one way of understanding the world to another. This is why our team settled on the title "Crossing Over." For our part as the church, we are likewise "crossing over" from one season to the next. We bid farewell to the rhythmic normalcy of Ordinary Time, with its comfortable call stories and Gospel worldbuilding, and we become reacquainted with the pain and perseverance of the Lenten journey to the cross. Even for those congregations less tethered to the lectionary cycles, occasions like Valentine's Day for your adults, mid-term examinations for your students, or the reevaluation of New Year's resolutions likewise offer your hearers an opportunity to discern what sort of "Crossing Over" God may be inviting them to receive.

In the lesson from Kings, the author is preparing us to hear about Elisha's work as prophet, but not before Elijah can make his famous departure. Elisha's clingy and fearful behavior is easily relatable to the lived experiences of both preacher and hearer; many of us were afraid to spend a night away from our parents for the first time, leave for college, settle into our first day on the job, or even accept our first pastoral appointment. How many of these times did a mentor or loved one tell us that it was time for them to leave... time for us to take up the mantle... but we refused to accept it? Did God not watch over us in those times and seasons? The ambiguous resolution to Elisha's story may provide us a comforting occasion to revisit how those painful departures turned out in the long run. For the adults in our congregations, stories from our lived experiences where tension and anxiety were alleviated one step at a time, or over a long stretch of time, can be especially helpful memories to jog when interpreting this narrative.

Elisha pleads with his teacher that he would receive a double portion of his spirit, which is a difficult phrase both to define and to interpret. But how did it turn out? Did he receive the double portion? The question has no clear answer. Elisha doesn't get to see Elijah's face during his ascent as he had asked, but he does receive power that is at least comparable to that of his teacher. He literally takes up the mantle and parts the waters of the Jordan as he crosses over into the beginning of his own prophetic ministry. At the very least, he is able to take this first step by performing as his first sign the last one his teacher had done. Whatever the case, the responsibility and expectation laid on Elisha was now quite clear. Ready or not, he must now defend the honor and glory of the God of Israel against Baal and Baal's prophets. The crossing over was painful for Elisha in the moment, but his prophetic ministry would go on to be considered one of the greatest in Israelite history. The growing pain of the transition seems to have borne fruit that was worth the struggle.

In the Gospel lesson, the evangelist is offering us an uncharacteristically explicit story of revelation before the pace of the narrative grinds to an abrupt halt in its second act. The Transfiguration of Jesus also brings him together in the cloud with the only Hebrew prophets who ever had the luxury of appointing their successors: Moses chose Joshua, and Elijah chose Elisha. The marriage of these texts offers us preachers the chance to consider what sort of invitations to leadership and service Jesus is issuing these three disciples. The reluctance of the disciples to accept their responsibility mirrors Elisha's position in the Hebrew narrative. If we are to be faithful to Mark's Gospel as we interpret the Transfiguration in this light, we must remember its literary context. Mark tells this story in the midst of Jesus' frustrated, repeated attempts to help his disciples understand that he must suffer the trial and death that leads to the cross, but they just cannot accept it. Furthermore, we find in Mark this unique dynamic in which nobody seems to understand what messiahship means- and especially not the disciples. What truth can the Transfiguration speak to these circumstances?

We, along with the chosen disciples, have the privilege of hearing the answer in the form of speech directly from God: "This is my son, the beloved, listen to him." The magnitude of a divine encounter like this one characterizes Jesus' messiahship in two important ways. First, the voice from within the cloud justifies Jesus' predictions of suffering despite the disciples' refusal to accept them. Whether they like it or not, "Crossing Over" into the next phase of Jesus' ministry will come with some challenges for the disciples. You might choose to hold a couple of postmodern proverbs in dialogue with God's words here: "no pain, no gain;" and, "nobody said it would be easy." In what sense do those adages help us understand these words of Scripture? In what ways do they fall short or raise concerns?

Second, the message from God endorses Jesus' authority to transition the work and leadership of his mission to the disciples after the Passion and Resurrection. Like Moses and Elijah before him, Jesus knows that God longs to empower far more than just one individual. There is only one Messiah, but all people are called to be disciples. All people are called to "drink the cup" that Jesus drank; all people are called to "be baptized with his baptism." We all must follow Jesus on the way to the cross and be prepared to take up his mantle when we are called.

The characteristic urgency of Mark continues when the cloud dissipates. Immediately, Jesus instructs the disciples to "tell no one," and get back to work. In Mark, just like in the Book of Kings, "crossing over" brings growing pains. But ready or not, the time is now for the followers of Jesus to respond to his invitations to ministry. For Mark, the need for disciples- both then and now- to grasp Jesus' true identity in light of the cross could not be more urgent. For "behold, the Kingdom of God is at hand."

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#### **Liturgical Resources:**

##### **Call to Worship**

The mighty one, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.  
**Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth** (Psalm 50:1-2).

God's glory fills the earth, but sometimes we, like Elisha, do not think we are ready to encounter glory.  
**And yet, God's glory showed up anyway.**

Sometimes we are like the disciples who witnessed Jesus' transfiguration and wanted to cling to that one glorious moment.

**And yet, God called them down from the mountain.**

So, we gather today, some of us feeling ready and some of us feeling wholly unprepared, yet all are called together to worship and to be led by glory out into the world.

**God, may we perceive your glory all around us, pointing us in the way you would have us go. Amen.**

*Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, August 2023.*

### **Prayer for the Day**

Mighty God, stay with us always, not only in our worship,  
but as we share the risk and challenge of living our faith.

By your powerful Spirit, turn our fear to courage.

Your glory shines in the face of Christ;

shine in our hearts and lives.

May your name be praise, glorious God! Amen.

Written by Ruth C. Duck, in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2012), 40.

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### **Prayer of Confession**

*Take My Life: A Confession*

*(Soloist sings one line of "Take my Life" Frances R. Havergal, 1873)*

Soloist: Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.

**ALL: We are yours, Lord, though we fight for control. Take our lives; make us yours.**

Soloist: Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.

**ALL: We are yours, Lord, though our busyness gets in the way. Take our days; make them yours.**

Soloist: Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love.

**ALL: We are yours, Lord, though we are not always in service. Take our hands; make them yours.**

Soloist: Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

**ALL: We are yours, Lord, even though our feet don't always move with your Spirit. Take our feet; make them yours. Amen.**

*Written by Ciona D. Rouse, The Africana Worship Book, Year B (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 151.*

**Benediction**

Beloved, go now in the strength and power of what you have witnessed in this place knowing that the glory that leads us into transition also comforts us in our growing pains and sustains us as we take up our mantle and cross over to the other side. Amen.

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