

**Sermon for 2-11-2018**  
**Scriptures: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9**  
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How do we know what we know?

What is truth?

What does it mean to believe?

I don't have answers. These are big, heavy, philosophical questions, and I find them fascinating, but if I delve too deeply into them I quickly begin to feel disoriented, like I'm on some kind of wild spinning carnival ride and my instincts are telling me to press the big red EMERGENCY STOP button and exit the ride immediately... I should leave it to the philosophers!

And still... this morning's passages from 2 Kings and Mark's Gospel call to mind some of those big questions. What does it take to make a person believe something? How do we know God, and how do we know of God? Did the disciples believe in Jesus; did they know who and what he was (and is)? Do we?

Let's look at the scriptures. First, this passage from the beginning of 2 Kings. It's the story of the prophet Elijah's death; or, more accurately, the end of his earthly life, when God takes him up into heaven with a whirlwind and chariot of fire. It's an amazing image, isn't it? The faithful prophet is lifted up from the bank of the Jordan River, winds rushing around and around, and he rises higher into the air, riding a chariot pulled by horses, blazing with fire... a dramatic illustration of God's majesty and power. That's the image most likely to linger in our minds after we hear these verses. But there's more going on here.

Elijah was a great prophet, teacher, and miracle worker. His ability to know the will of God and declare it, and to act as a vessel for God's power in the world was clear. What was not so clear was the question of 'what comes next?'. Elijah's followers, his school of prophets, and indeed all the people of Israel might well have been wondering what would happen after his death, and this passage establishes Elisha as Elijah's successor, ordained by God. It may not be obvious to us, but the transfer of powers, the passing of the torch from Elijah to Elisha, is clear to those who know well another story of succession and divine authority from the Torah -- that of Moses and Joshua.

The symbolism in this passage is meant to convince us that Elisha is to Elijah just as Joshua was to Moses -- the rightful inheritor of his predecessor's authority. The three locations mentioned here (Gilgal, Jericho, and the Jordan River) are all turning points in Joshua's story. Elijah parts the waters of the Jordan just as Moses parted the Red Sea waters, and in the next verses (which we didn't get in today's reading) Elisha parts the Jordan again... just like Joshua does after Moses is dead.

Elisha is uniquely dedicated and loyal to Elijah, and he vows never to leave him; he promises to stay with Elijah until the end. He asks Elijah for "a double share of [Elijah's] spirit;"<sup>i</sup> a double share being the rightful inheritance of a firstborn son and heir. Elijah, of course, understands the significance of this request, and also realizes that it is not his decision whether Elisha will be his successor but God's. That's why he responds the way he does: "if you see me while I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."<sup>ii</sup>

If Elisha is to be a true prophet, if he is Elijah's rightful successor, he must be able to see that which is hidden from the eyes of others. Elisha must be able to see and hear and know God.<sup>iii</sup> Believing in God is not enough; to be a prophet, Elisha must have prophetic sensibilities, he must know God and see God's action in the world. And so in this powerful moment, when Elisha stands watching his mentor ascend to the heavens, we, and the school of prophets, and the people of Israel are made to understand that Elisha does indeed have a prophet's knowledge of God. The symbolism, the miracles, and the powerful images are there for our benefit, to convince us of a Truth -- that the prophetic tradition of Elijah continues in Elisha. Elijah's death is not the end of his holy work... sound familiar?

Now, let's look at our passage from Mark's Gospel, the story of the transfiguration. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John -- his inner circle -- up on a mountain, to show them something amazing, to help them understand. The three disciples watch as Jesus's clothes become dazzlingly bright, and two men appear with him -- Elijah and Moses. The great Hebrew leader and the great Hebrew prophet, both long dead, are there, talking with Jesus. About what, we don't know.

When I read this passage I cannot help but picture Jesus as a boxer, sitting on a stool in the corner of the ring, perhaps with a dazzling white towel around his neck, and Moses and Elijah standing behind him, rubbing his shoulders, offering cold water and encouraging words. It's not a great analogy, particularly because Jesus is not about to punch anyone in the gut no matter what comes at him. Nevertheless, it's my imagined visual of the transfiguration.

Here, just as in our passage from 2 Kings, there is deep symbolism and a sense of continued divine authority. Moses and Elijah aren't there by coincidence. Their appearance makes a statement about who and what Jesus is. Rabbinic tradition placed a strong emphasis on the relationship between Moses and Elijah: "... two prophets rose up for Israel out of the tribe of Levi; one the first of all the prophets, and the other the last of all the prophets: Moses first and Elijah last, and both with a commission to redeem Israel."<sup>iv</sup> You and I might not have known the significance of these two figures together, but observant Jews like Peter, John, James, and many readers of Mark's Gospel certainly did.

Knowing about the historic Jewish understanding of Moses and Elijah helps us 'get' what's going on here. It's not just any two Old Testament figures standing on that mountain with Jesus; it's Moses and Elijah. Moses, the great liberator and law-giver, and Elijah, the great prophet and miracle worker, and both redeemers of Israel! Their presence with Jesus makes it clear that he is no mere teacher or holy man; he is their rightful heir, the continuation of God's promise, the new Redeemer.

Peter, James, and John may have *suspected* that Jesus was the Christ before this moment on the mountain. They may have *believed* that Jesus was the Christ after watching him cast out demons and feed hungry crowds and heal sick people. But now, standing on the mountain and watching Jesus talk with Moses and Elijah... now they *know*. They *know* that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the promised Savior.

But what about us? What about you and me? We weren't there on the mountain that day. We don't get to see rivers parted and chariots of fire and clothes transformed into dazzling brightness. So how do we *know*?

True knowledge of God is a miracle. And what is a miracle? I believe a miracle is a moment in time or space when outer appearance and inner essence become one; when the physical and the spiritual are the same; when a flash of holiness breaks through the veil between heaven and earth. When Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle and parts the waters of the Jordan River through his new divinely ordained authority, it is a miracle. When Jesus, through his limitless compassion and mercy, feeds five thousand people on five loaves of bread and two fish, that is a miracle. When the greatest of God's leaders and the greatest of God's prophets stand together with the One who is the fulfillment and perfection of God's promise, that is a miracle. Miracles happen when invisible truths become visible to us, when that which we believe becomes that which we know.

Some of us have experienced dramatic miracles in our lives. Perhaps we have heard God's voice calling us out of the depths of despair, perhaps we have felt God's presence guiding our steps in times of trial, perhaps we have known God's hands supporting and upholding us when we otherwise might have fallen. And yet some of us have not had these experiences; some of us cannot point to a particular moment or memory and say, "There! Yes, there! God was there." But those are not the only times that the outer and the inner become one, they are not the only times that the spiritual is visible to us.

My friends, miracles are all around us. Holiness breaks through the veil when human beings choose to sacrifice their earthly interests in favor of that which is altogether incomprehensible to the powers and principalities of this world -- the self-sacrificing Love of God in Jesus Christ.

When we lay down our weapons and refuse to meet violence with more violence, that is a miracle. When we show mercy by extending forgiveness to those who do not deserve it, that is a miracle. When we leave behind our status and security to stand side-by-side with those who are outcast and powerless, that is a miracle. When we look around and see a world filled not with strangers but with neighbors we don't yet know, that is a miracle. When we share our own food and resources with those who are hungry and have none, that is a miracle. When we face death without fear, holding fast to the blessed assurance of the Resurrection, that is a miracle.

Moments like these are our whirlwinds, our chariots of fire, our Red Sea water partings, our transfigurations. These are our miracles, the places where holiness breaks through, where we *see* and *know* God. May we help each other to see and know God, here at Christ Church and beyond, in the weeks and months and years to come. May we go forth and be miracles together! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 2 Kings 2:9 NRSV

<sup>ii</sup> 2:10

<sup>iii</sup> Sweeney 273-274 "I & II Kings: A Commentary"

<sup>iv</sup> *Pesiq. R.4.2* in Craig A. Evans, "Mark" (Eerdmans 1085)