

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

The Great Unveiling

22 February 2009

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2 Kings 2: 1-12

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our wonderfully and magnificently transformed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on this, the liturgical “high point” between the festivals of Christmas and Easter..... Transfiguration!

What are you afraid of? I’m not wild about heights, but tight spaces really give me the creeps. Pam is terrified of snakes. Did you know that Madonna is phobic when it comes to thunder....and Alfred Hitchcock wouldn’t go in the same room as an EGG? There are literally hundreds of phobias and fears (including one called ‘homilophobia’....the fear of sermons)....but today we’re going to address one thing that affects most humans....the fear of separation.

It’s a part of life that none of us really ever get used to..... being separated from those we love. It happens to me on my annual trips to Milwaukee to visit my parents. As the week ends and we get ready to head home, my thoughts inevitably move towards “What if this is the last time I ever get to say goodbye? What if I don’t get to see you again?” I don’t like the mood it brings on in me....but right about then, my mother....a perpetually permanent Pollyannawill simply say, “It’s OK dear...we’ll all be fine!”

You military families know EXACTLY what I’m talking about. Hope has quite a few families with dads or nowadays even moms facing deployments of 6 months or more. We have families where dad is geo-batching and only comes home on weekends....or less. It’s hard on a marriage, it’s tough on the kids, and let’s be brutally honest, when you’re going off into harm’s way, there’s no absolute guarantees of a return, are there?

When we reach the level of separation called death, it gets tougher. I’ve sat with many families as we said goodbye to loved ones who were about to step through death’s door, and while it isn’t easy, it’s our faith....and their faith.... in Jesus Christ that gives us the confidence and hope that is needed at the time.

The Transfiguration story is a very familiar one. Jesus leads 3 of his disciples, Peter, James and John, up to a mountaintop to prepare them for His suffering, death

and resurrection. Jesus knows that while things will be terrible for Him, His disciples will suffer also, and He needs to fill them with Hope, with Confidence, and with Boldness to face their future.

In our Old Testament we have another example of “separation preparation.” God’s prophet Elijah prepared his successor and apprentice Elisha for the time when he would leave and Elisha would be left behind. Elijah’s ministry as God’s main prophet to Israel wasn’t easy. After the defeat of the prophets of Baal, Queen Jezebel vowed to kill Elijah.

He fled into the wilderness and fearing that he was the last Godly prophet left, prayed for God to simply end his life. Filled with despair, Elijah just plain gave up.

But *God* didn’t.

God strengthened Elijah with an angel and commissioned him to continue working as his prophet, to the point of giving him the job of anointing the next king of Israel. God brought a young man alongside old Elijah as an apprentice and a helper....and Elisha served him well until the time described in our text.

On the way to Bethel, a crowd of prophets came out and said to Elisha, “*Do you know God is going to take your master from you today?*” “Yes I know,” replied Elisha, “but don’t speak of it.”

A few miles down the road another crowd of prophets met them with the very same greeting, “*Elisha, do you know the Lord is going to take your master from you today?*” Elisha’s response was the same.... “I know it, but hush!!!”

Do you sense a little separation anxiety going on in Elisha??? His words remind me of Peter’s words as our Lord spoke about His impending death, “*Jesus, I forbid you to talk about it!*”

They crossed the Jordan River (with a small miracle involved) and then, in a scene that would challenge Steven Spielberg, God took Elijah to heaven in a fiery chariot....in front of the amazed eyes of Elisha and 50 other prophets.

Question of the day: how many of you have ever said goodbye to a loved one? The answer has to be ALL of US! It can be as simple as watching little Farquar get on

the school bus. It can mean standing on the pier as dad leaves on his ship. It can be as innocent as a peck on the cheek as you separate for a day at work or as painful as standing at a bedside in the Intensive Care Unit with the pastor waiting to perform Last Rights. Separation is never easy!

In fact, of all separations I have ever heard about, you'd think Elisha would have had it fairly easy. After all...Elijah didn't DIE....God "whisked" him to heaven in front of his eyes in a chariot of fire, while at the same time passing on the mantle of ministry to Elisha. Out of love, God pulled back the veil that surrounds death to show us what comes next....the reality of life with God!

Jesus' transfiguration prepared Peter, James and John for the suffering and death of their Lord....and eventually, for the time when He would separate from them. At the same time, Jesus' transfiguration reminds each of us that Moses and Elijah and countless other saints who have gone before us now reside with Jesus in heavenly glory and that we shall not only SEE them again, we shall RECOGNIZE them again.....after all, Peter, James and John somehow KNEW that it was Moses and Elijah (and I'll bet they weren't wearing nametags!).

And when the time came for Jesus to ascend into heaven, while the disciples still didn't want to see Him leave, Jesus had made it perfectly clear to them that they had ministry to carry on until their time came as well.....and as a result of their response to His Great Commission, you and I are here in God's house today!

It is in the miraculous taking of Elijah to heaven.....it is in the fantastic transfiguration of Jesus.....it is in the words of the centurion at the foot of the cross (*Surely this was the Son of God*).....and it is in our day to day faith that God pulls back the veil and gives us this wonderful glimpse of heaven to come.

As amazing as it is to imagine Moses and Elijah with Jesus on that mountaintop, imagine those you love who are already WITH Christ and are "just beyond the veil" of our earthly sight. Better still, unlike Peter, James and John, they no longer have to go back down the mountain. They are with Him, now and forever, as we will be someday also. I can...and I do....take great peace and great hope from the promises God has given to US in this story.

There's one more aspect of the story that actually fascinates me, and it's this: *Elijah knew that God was going to take him to heaven on that particular day.* Elisha knew it too....and so did 50 other prophets. How? I guess prophets just know this stuff because they are prophets. The point for me, however, is this....how does ELIJAH *behave* knowing it is his last day? Does he run off in his own version of the "*Bucket List*" with Nicholson and Freeman?

What did Elijah do the day he died....when he knew he was going to die? Pretty much the same stuff he's been doing through his entire life....which is fine, because he'd been doing what GOD wanted him to do all along. He was confident in his relationship with His God and as such, he was, as the old expression puts it, "good to go." He knew Elisha would pick up his mantle and continue the work of being God's prophet to the people of Israel. For him, there was no separation anxiety, only a tremendous expectation of what for him was just behind the veil!

Isn't that the way it with us when it comes to separation? If we have a strong and healthy relationship with each other, we KNOW we will make it through, no matter what! And when we have a strong and healthy relationship with our Lord Jesus, we know that we will make it through out lives until that day comes we also will join the great heavenly chorus around the throne of God....and until then....we will DO the things God has called us to do, supporting each other as together we continue to "make disciples of all nations."

It's who we are.....and it's what we do!