

Close Encounters with the Divine

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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II Kings 2:1–12

Mark 9:2–9

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¹Now 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 anymore, 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Many years ago, a young girl went to church camp. She did the typical things at camp, made new friends, went swimming, and did art and crafts. The last night there was a service where they sang their most favorite songs. They had a candlelight service and at the end they walked silently with their candles lit across the ridge back to their cabin. Later, after she got home, she confided in her mother that at camp, she felt that God was very real.

Tucked into this young girl's week at camp is a close encounter with the divine. It may not be as remarkable as the Transfiguration or as noteworthy as an epiphany with angels and blinding lights, but for a moment this young girl felt God close at hand. In the midst of the ordinary, and predictable, an extra ordinary moment happens that touches the heart of a child.

How do we keep that moment? We cannot bottle it up and make it last even into the next day. As wonderful and empowering the experiences we do move on.

Sometimes we try to deny or avoid such encounters. At least that is what happens with Elisha in II Kings. Elisha is doing everything possible not to let Elijah go. Even when Elijah and everyone else tells him it will happen. And when it does, Elisha has a close encounter with God that changes him into a mighty prophet like his predecessor.

John Mahoney, an actor who played the father in the sitcom Fraser as well as holding roles in movies and the theater, tried to practice being kind and respectful to others. And what motivated him in his

life was a close encounter with the divine. In an interview in 2006 he says:¹

“I was very, very self-centered when I was young. I thought the world revolved around me. It even affected my work when I became an actor. I used to think about how great I had to be and how wonderful I had to be on that stage instead of honoring the playwright or honoring the screenwriter and becoming a part of something that was wonderful.”

While he can't put an exact date on it, John believes his mind began to change when his heart did, around the time he had what he describes as an “epiphany” in a Roman Catholic church in downtown Chicago around 1975. He continues, “I was in the Loop, and I went into St. Peter's and went to Mass, and it was just about the most emotional thing that ever happened to me. I don't know where it came from, I just had a little breakdown of some sort, and after that, I made a conscious effort to be a better person, to be a part of the world, and to try to revolve around everyone else in the world instead of expecting them to revolve around me.”

It was a close encounters with the divine.

The disciples resisted leaving the moment of the Transfiguration. It was in that moment that they knew who Jesus was. But down on the plain, people did not know who he was. Down below, Jesus was making powerful enemies and that was not good for any of them. For Jesus and his disciples, life was not easy off the mountain. The mountain top is an attractive place to be.

¹ Cathleen Falsani Possley, *The God Factor: Inside the Spiritual Lives of Public people* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006.)

Sometimes we try to stay with the encounter by surrounding ourselves with those who think and believe the same way we do. We try to protect ourselves by avoiding questions to our beliefs. It makes us feel safe and secure. Unfortunately, life has a way of intruding into that security.

As we move from our close encounter, we need to be sure to travel lightly. Peter wanted to create dwellings to mark the moment when the disciples saw Jesus with Elijah and Moses. He wanted to add more things to the moment, add to the load. But Jesus tells him no. When we give the more weight to the moment than to the message, then we may be in danger of worshipping the moment or the memory rather than the true God. When we enshrine things to keep the memory, we have a difficult burden to carry.

As we leave the moment of a close encounter, we do so with a traveling companion, Jesus, God's son. Remember the words that came from above, "This is my Son my Beloved, Listen to him!" Let us not let all the other trappings or become distracted by enshrining big things that have happened that we lose the message. Listen to him!

Mark concludes this experience with the instructions for the disciples to remain silent. Imagine having such an amazing day. It was a day that affirmed the past three years of teaching and healing and creating a stir. Peter comes down from the mountain with the knowledge that following Jesus is being a part of something greater than what he imagined and yet he is to keep silent.

Remember our scriptures today. All of Elisha's colleagues say to him that you know what is going to happen with Elijah. He tells them to be quiet! I don't want to hear it. But with the disciples it is Jesus who says now is not the time, don't tell people until it all

makes sense. Imagine Peter coming home and his wife asking, “What’s new?” And Peter responds, “Not much, you know same old thing. Went up to the mountain top with Jesus!” Yet what they had just seen and heard and felt confirmed that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s son and they were to listen to him! And the first thing he tells them is to keep quiet!! Yikes!!!!

Maybe it is not words that we are called to use when we have close encounters with the divine. Maybe we are not to say “You should have been there, or you really missed something great!” Words can be easy, but what has a far more profound impact is how our lives are changed because of those exquisite high moments. We do not have to write best sellers on how to make the most of our own close encounter with God. We are not going to go on the talk show circuit. We are changed by those moment and that is reflected not with words but with how we live our life. In trying to show respect for others and to be kind.

The company of those who have experienced light blinding conversions or holy mountain epiphanies are few. Most of us, like the young girl at camp experience fleeting moments. Do those moments have the lasting power that influence the rest of our lives? They with all our experiences are woven into the tapestry of who we are; those moments influence us in ways we may never fully comprehend or appreciate. For that young girl who went to camp, years have passed. She grows up and encounters more many more experiences. She feels the highs and lows of life. She immerses herself in her school and career, in falling in love, marriage and parenthood. She leads an ordinary life. As she moves through her life, she moves in and out of church and her life with God. There may have been more times when she felt God so close. I do not know because those things are not readily shared. She is

not the innocent and open young girl of many years before. People do not always welcome the sharing of such things. As an observer, I have seen the choices she has made over the years. She is an elder in her Presbyterian church. She teaches Sunday school and vacation bible school and is a confirmation mentor. Her life and values reflect that God has a place in her life. She is honest and open to others and tries to work for the good. She and her husband have raised their children with the usual soccer practices, and flute lessons, through it all, church activities have been important, retreats, mission trips and youth conferences.

This grown woman and her children are not ones to share such moments with the divine, but their choices and their actions indicate that God is a part of their lives. They are immersed in this world, not staying in the heights of the mountains. Their actions reflect having Christ as a traveling companion more than words can ever express.

Close encounters with God are empowering, beautiful and filled with wonder, but all too soon the moment passes. And we are back in the challenges of this world. Let us allow the close encounters with the divine to be a change agent in our lives. Allow us to hear with new ears hear the words, "This is my son my beloved, listen to him." How we live our lives will tell our story of close encounters with the divine. Amen.