

Weekly Reading – Monday, February 16, 2009

Up this week are the lessons for Sunday, February 22, 2009, "Washington's Birthday" in the old dispensation. From the standpoint of the church year, it is the last Sunday in Epiphany or after Epiphany, or Transfiguration Sunday. The lessons center on the story of the Transfiguration of Christ, an event that appears in all the synoptic gospels, and comes from this year's Gospel, Mark. But first to the companion text from the Old Testament.

II Kings 2: 1 - 12

This is the account of Elijah's being "taken up," up, up and away to heaven, and of Elisha's succession to the prophetic mantle and office. In good story-teller and biblical fashion, there is a three-fold dramatic element of Elijah instructing Elisha to stay behind and each time Elisha refusing. Persistent bugger. The story is mystery shrouded and there's a sense in which everyone knows what's going on and no one knows what's going on. Sort of the way it is when death draws near. Elisha is not only persistent but bold. He doesn't mind asking for a "double-share" of his mentor's mojo. I suppose that could be seen as self-aggrandizing, but on the other hand it may a humble recognition that he will need all the help he can get. Finally, they come in Celtic language to a "thin place," where the membrane between time and eternity, heaven and earth is thin and porous. Chariots of fire (remember that movie?) and horses come thundering forth and Elijah is transported to heaven by a whirlwind. Not that would be a cool way to go! Or maybe not. Elisha is grief stricken and yet a recipient of power and insight. That too, is at least some times, the strange way of death. Grief, life broken open, and yet a gift or many gifts conferred and a new chapter opened. As a companion to the Transfiguration, it is at the very least an invitation to a Sunday and service of great mystery and power. This is God stuff, God doing. Too often in sermons, preachers beat a hasty retreat from the mystery and power saying, "We can't tarry on the mountain, we must get down to the valley to serve." Listening I wonder if we preachers may not want to be in the presence of mystery and awe, but would like to get back to something that re-inforces our illusion of control?

II Corinthians 4: 3 - 6

One of the larger themes of II Corinthians is the nature of ministry generally and of Paul's apostolic ministry in particular. This passage is set within that larger context and its acknowledgment that while some have had the eyes of their hearts opened, others have not. Hence, people hearing the same message, or seeing the same things, that get very different messages. Paul uses the image of a veil to get at this mystery. To some "our gospel is veiled." This seems to parallel John's use of "the world" in the Fourth Gospel. Those who are "of this world," don't see what is right before their eyes, don't hear what is being said in their midst. In particular, what is hidden here is the glory of Christ. It is this theme, Christ's glory, that results in this passage being chosen for this Sunday, Transfiguration. The themes of ministry/ Paul's ministry and Christ's glory intersect then in verse five, "For we do not proclaim ourselves, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." As I have noted in other comments other weeks, the temptation to "proclaim ourselves" is great

today for churches and clergy because confidence in the power of God's word and God's revelation in Christ seem diminished.

Mark 9: 2 - 9

It is profitable for the preacher to read and compare the accounts of the Transfiguration from Luke and Matthew to this one from Mark, noting the differences to better understand the particular theological message of the author. In Mark's way, this one is spare. It is also useful to note the larger context. This story follows on Chapter 8 with its first prediction of the cross and lengthy discussion of discipleship and the cross. Given that, it seems that there is a kind of rhythm. Chapter 8 emphasizes the cost of discipleship and the cross. Chapter 9, or at least the Transfiguration, emphasizes the glory, a kind of foreshadowing of the resurrection. We are soon to enter into the Lenten journey, a sort of valley and time for emphasis on discipleship and cross. Before we go a vision, a sustaining glimpse of glory. I used to feel this way about wilderness time and hikes on vacation before returning to another year of pastoral ministry. Take it in, I told myself, beholding nature's grandeur. You'll need the inspiration and the bigger picture in the days to come. We tend often to focus on Peter's anxious, intramural activities. "Hey boss, how's about I build a couple booths, shines. I'd sure like something, anything to do!" "Don't just do something--stand there!" And when we stand there we behold the human Jesus transfigured as the Risen and ruling Christ. Of late, as my friend Fleming Rutledge remarks, we hear a kerygma of Jesus preached a lot. About the human Jesus, his compassion, his insight, his invitation to a spiritual journey. We hear less a kerygma of Christ, Christ crucified, Christ resurrected, Christ ruling at the right hand of God. Perhaps this is a text and a Sunday to struggle with that shift and to preach Christ!