

Keeping Our Eyes on Jesus  
II Kings 2:1-14  
Mark 9:2-13

“Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.”

The eyes of Elisha and Peter and James and John stopped me in my tracks this past week as I tried to make sense of the words on the pages of Scripture. What did they see? Where did they look? When did they blink? What did it mean? The word coined to capture the content of what they saw, the word for eternity invading time, is glory. Glory is the outward manifestation of God. “Glory is what God looks like,” wrote novelist and preacher Frederick Buechner, “when, for the time being, all you have to look at [God] with is a pair of eyes.”

But how can glory be contained upon a page? What possible combination of nouns and verbs, adjectives and adverbs are able to hold in solution God made manifest and glimpsed for a wrinkle in time? The words and images, borrowed this morning by two who tried, were words stretched to the limit of what words can say. One wrote of chariots of fire and horses of fire, of a whirlwind carrying Elijah into heaven. Later readers of Scripture would say this is the language of apocalyptic, the sort of speech you hear when ordered worlds have collapsed. The other spoke of clothes become dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. I imagine Mark shaking his head at the poverty of this sentence, his spare writing, to tell the truth, so matter-of-fact that Matthew was compelled to add, “His face shone like the sun.” The light! The light corresponding to God’s presence in time, leaving all who see not so much blind as mute. Momentarily.

“Seeing,” writes Annie Dillard in a chapter on this most remarkable sense afforded human existence, “is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won’t see it. It is,” in the words of art critic John Ruskin,

“not merely unnoticed, but in the full, clear sense of the word, unseen.” To wit: not having studied art, my eyes untutored by generations that have seen in a brush stroke an epoch ended or begun, I may see something and be moved, my attention arrested, even as I miss the meaning, the import, the detail that should take my breath away. But put the earphones on or trail behind a docent and words direct my eye to linger and so see what I would never see, comprehend what would not occur to me, without them. “I have to say the words,” says Dillard, “describe what I am seeing. If Tinker Mountain erupted, I’d be likely to notice. But if I want to notice the lesser cataclysms of valley life, I have to maintain in my head a running description of the present....When I see this way, I analyze and pry.”

I think of the company of prophets putting words to this luminal moment every step of the way. “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” I think of Peter who did not know what to say, but spoke because he was terrified; it was his way to make sense of his seeing. “It’s not that I’m observant,” Dillard goes on, “it’s just that I talk too much.” Words spoken by the church about God, words filling thick, heavy tomes analyzing and prying open the strange world of the Bible, preachers and teachers attempting to plumb the depths of meaning in a cut flower culture, these mean to be our earphones, guiding us through the ancient rooms of revelation. Even within the biblical narrative, this is the case.

Enter Elijah and Elisha. Thanks to Felix Mendelssohn, the part of the story most known is of a battle pitched by this troubler of Israel against the prophets of Baal. He is also the prophet, you will remember, met by God not in wind or earthquake or fire, but in the sound of sheer silence. Now he is about to be “taken up” to heaven, his mantle tossed on the shoulders of Elisha; but Elisha’s prophetic vocation will be nothing without Elijah’s spirit, without the gift of the power to discern God’s presence and purpose in the midst of human history.

Here Elisha's seeing first caught my eye. He requests a double share of Elijah's spirit. "You have asked a hard thing," says Elijah, "yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." My footnotes fall silent on this matter, as do the commentaries. What difference would it make for Elisha to keep his eyes on Elijah, unless it is through keeping his eye on the one who has preceded him—his words, his deeds, his witness-- that Elisha's eyes will know where to look, will recognize and reject the Baals of the world that will blind him, will be given the grace to see, in the lesser cataclysms of daily life, God made manifest—until Elijah should come again!

Curiously, Elijah is not mentioned outside the Kings' narratives until the last verses of Malachi, which is the last book in the Old Testament canon according to Protestants: "Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances, that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." Still it is believed by Jews that Elijah will return, at the climax of human history, to announce the messianic era. Additionally, write the rabbis, as "the Talmud is unable definitively to resolve certain questions of law or practice,...the questions will have to wait for Elijah. With the advent of the final era, one of Elijah's roles will be to resolve all those lingering scholarly quandaries."

In a sense, Elijah's absence has shaped a community of faith by its unanswered questions. As one rabbi put it, "Whether it is the innocent question of a youngster at the Seder, or the penetrating query of a Talmudic sage, Judaism neither hides its questions nor hides from them. Thoughtful questions fueled by a relentless pursuit of truth and wisdom are part and parcel of the Jewish experience." To see in this way is to analyze and pry the mystery met by our eyes, with the caveat that the words we put to our glimpses of God's glory can never be definitive. Words

are what we say to see, in the meantime, while we wait.

With my eyes on Elijah this week, I saw something I had never seen of Jesus—or rather, something we think we see when we see Jesus. “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asks the disciples six days before he is transfigured. And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others say Elijah....” Maybe this *is* who we think he is: a prophet of God that never died, who has come to resolve all those lingering scholarly quandaries about the meaning of the law and the prophets. Sometimes I think we think of him as disembodied words on the pages of the New Testament, written by God to be the definitive answer to all our questions. Could this be why we invoke his words, plainly and directly, essentially and certainly, to settle our every internecine quarrel? Thinking he is Elijah returned, we have been shaped into communities of certitude. I think this until I am made to wrestle, once a year, with the indescribable light that appeared to Peter and James and John on the mountaintop.

What I love in Mark’s story is the way God interrupts Peter’s attempt to analyze and pry into the mystery unfolding before his eyes. A cloud overshadows them. Truly, this is how it goes, the moment we think we have mystery tidied up. What we think we have seen clearly is taken from our sight. In those moments, another kind of seeing comes into play. It involves, says Dillard, “a letting go. When I see in this way,” she reports, “I sway transfixed and emptied....” One way or another, from out of the cloud, it is now the ear that guides the eye, for we are blind unless we should be silent, unless we should listen for a word not our own. “I know,” says Elisha to the company of prophets. “Be silent!” “This is my Son, the Beloved!” says the voice, “Listen to him!” The cloud lifts, we open our eyes and see only Jesus. The mantle of his gospel is nothing without his spirit that is given as we keep our eyes on him. He is not Elijah come to give us the answers. Elijah has come and gone, says Mark, in John. This is God’s Son, come to give

us into God's keeping, now and eternally. With our eyes on him, "standing four square in the midst of a broken, tortured, oppressed, starving, dehumanizing reality, yet seeing the invisible, calling to it, importuning it to come, behaving as if it is on the way" says Walter Wink, we now begin to make our way to Jerusalem, to the cross, to the grave. "If any want to become my followers," he said to everyone before his transfiguration, "let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me." To see him involves a letting go. Though here is the rub according to Dillard. "I can't go out and try to see this way. I'll fail, I'll go mad.

All I can do is try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing....The effort is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle; it marks the literature of saints and monks of every order East and West, under every rule and no rule....The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise. I return from the same walk a day later scarcely knowing my own name. Litanies hum in my ears; my tongue flaps in my mouth Ailinoi, alleluia! I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam."

The most I can do, Sunday in and Sunday out, is try to put us in the path of his light by keeping my eye on him and on those who have kept their eyes on him, generation after generation; even as I try, in the same breath, to gag the commentator, hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps us from seeing. Then there are those Sundays, at the end of too many words, when I only know enough to know that prose cannot contain the sight. "So from the ground we felt that virtue branch/Through all our veins until we were whole," begins Edwin Muir's poem *The Transfiguration*, "our wrists

fresh and pure as water from a well,  
Our hands made new to handle holy things,  
The source of all our seeing rinsed and cleansed  
Till earth and light and water entering there  
Gave back to us the clear unfallen world.  
We would have thrown our clothes away for lightness,  
But that even they, though sour and travel stained,  
Seemed, like our flesh, made of immortal substance,  
And the soiled flax and wool lay light upon us

Like friendly wonders, flower and flock entwined  
As in a morning field. Was it a vision?  
Or did we see that day the unseeable  
One glory of the everlasting world  
Perpetually at work, though never seen  
Since Eden locked the gate that's everywhere  
And nowhere? Was the change in us alone,  
And the enormous earth still left forlorn,  
An exile or a prisoner? Yet the world  
We saw that day made this unreal, for all  
Was in its place. The painted animals  
Assembled there in gentle congregations,  
Or sought apart their leafy oratories,  
Or walked in peace, the wild and tame together,  
As if, also for them, the day had come.  
The shepherds' hovels shone, for underneath  
The soot we saw the stone clean at the heart  
As on the starting-day. The refuse heaps  
Were grained with that fine dust that made the world;  
For he had said, 'To the pure all things are pure.'  
And we went into the town, he with us,  
The lurkers under doorways, murderers,  
With rags tied round their feet for silence, came  
Out of themselves to us and were with us,  
And those who hide within the labyrinth  
Of their own loneliness and greatness came,  
And those entangled in their own devices,  
The silent and the garrulous liars, all  
Stepped out of their dungeons and were free.  
Reality or vision, this we have seen.  
If it had lasted but another moment  
It might have held forever! But the world  
Rolled back into its place, and we are here,  
And all that radiant kingdom lies forlorn  
As if it had never stirred; no human voice  
Is heard among its meadows, but it speaks  
To itself alone, alone it flowers and shines  
And blossoms for itself while time runs on.

But he will come again, it's said, though not  
Unwanted and unsummoned; for all things,  
Beasts of the field, and woods, and rocks, and seas,  
And all mankind from end to end of the earth  
Will call him with one voice. In our own time,  
Some say, or at a time when time is ripe,  
Then he will come, Christ the uncrucified,

Christ the dis-crucified, his death undone,  
His agony unmade, his cross dismantled—  
Glad to be so—and the tormented wood  
Will cure its hurt and grow into a tree  
In a green springing corner of young Eden,  
And Judas damned take his long journey backward  
From darkness into light and be a child  
Beside his mother's knee, and the betrayal  
Be quite undone and never more be done.

Ailinon, alleluia!