

Believing on the Boundaries
II Kings 2:1-12
Mark 9:2-9

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

On this last Sunday in the season after Epiphany, we begin with the words of Kayla Mueller--words smuggled out of Syria many months ago by her cellmates and shared only now with the world by her grieving parents: “I have been shown light in darkness. I have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful.” It was through her life and death that I read the two stories before us this morning, stories that take us to the boundaries: where light shines in the darkness, where the lesser lights of the gods of this world do not avail, where believing begins.

The boundaries are not where we live our lives day by day. In fact, most of us do whatever we can to avoid the boundaries: avoid the leap into the arms of God on the cliff’s edge of despair or the sharp turn in the road leading toward the cross given us to bear; avoid the dark night of the soul when other helpers fail and comforts flee or the moment when we must choose between the lie we are living and the truth for which we were made.

Instead we live within reason. When Paul rails against the god of this world that keeps unbelievers from seeing the light of the gospel, I think of the god of the middle way, the safe course, the practical way out, the god who tempts us to live in what Reinhold Niebuhr once characterized as the “nicely calculated less and more” where “human happiness is determined by the difference between a little more and a little less justice, a little more and a little less freedom,” a little more and a little less security, a little more and a little less truth. “It is so self-conscious,” Annie Dillard writes, “so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down,” where chariots of fire and horses of fire and clothes dazzling

white, such as no one on earth could bleach them, have been reported. Believing on the boundaries where, in Kayla's words, "the only one you really have is God," is simply unreasonable!

For Elisha, a legendary prophet to the Northern Kingdom in the 8th century B.C., the boundary of belief is where Elisha's mentor, Elijah, is about to be taken up in a whirlwind into heaven. Elijah tells Elisha, three times, not to follow him. "Stay here," he says, for Elijah must know that to follow him is to arrive at the dangerous and holy place where the heavens will split to reveal God's glory. Elisha could have stayed in Gilgal and kept company with the prophets who made their home there; he could have stayed in Bethel, where Abram built an altar to the Lord, where Jacob saw the ladder reaching up to heaven, where Israel's judges built shrines; he could have stayed in Jericho, where the Israelites first crossed over to the land God had promised. Elisha could have spent his life in any one of these "thin places" where people tell stories about past encounters with the holy. Instead, Elisha refuses to leave the side of the man who is on his way to God. He accompanies the prophet to the boundary where the heavens open and his father in faith is taken up, leaving Elisha to bear the prophet's mantle until he lies to die. To be sure, most of the Elisha stories that follow are bizarre. Nevertheless, they tell of the prophet mediating God's power and presence to people *in extremis*, to people on the boundaries, where only God avails.

I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was told to "Stay here!" during the war—and, in fact, was encouraged to accept an appointment to the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York (among the company of the prophets, including Reinhold Niebuhr!). But Bonhoeffer resisted the temptation of the god of this world to live in the nicely calculated less and more. He returned to Germany where God's light was made manifest not in the kitsch of Nazi propaganda

but in the incomprehensible darkness of human suffering. I imagine Kayla reading Bonhoeffer's words written from prison a few months before he was hung, : "[Human beings are] summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world....It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life....I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith...throw[ing] ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world....That, I think is faith."

Yet in the middle of Mark's Gospel, at the boundary between Jesus' public ministry and his passion, just before the turn he takes toward Jerusalem and the cross, the suffering of God's Son is precisely what the disciples could not fathom. Mark begins the strange story of the Transfiguration with words that require a backward glance: "Six days later," he writes: six days after he had asked his disciples who people said that he was; six days after they answered "John the Baptist and Elijah and one of the prophets"; six days after Peter answered, "You are the Messiah" and Jesus ordered them to tell no one. But most significantly, six days after Jesus began to teach them that he must undergo great suffering and be rejected and killed and, after three days, rise again. Six days after Peter rebuked him for this teaching, refusing to hear of Jesus' suffering and, by implication, of his own if he were to follow him. Six days after Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things," setting your mind on the god of this world. Six days later, God's glory is made manifest on the mountaintop.

In the encounter between Jesus and Peter, it seems to me that the god of this world, who was blinding Peter to the suffering of God and the suffering of humanity made manifest in Jesus, is the same god who tempts us to believe suffering ought not to be the lot for those who believe.

It was, in fact, this very understanding of the gospel that Paul was battling in the Corinthian church. Apparently, a group of “superapostles” had come to town preaching a gospel of glory without suffering and convincing the Corinthians that the Christian life was a life of pure light, with no darkness at all. As one reader of our text laments, “Unfortunately, it is hard to see the glory of God when you are standing in the spotlight.” [Shawnthea Monroe-Mueller]

Yet, in a way, you can understand Peter’s confusion. Until this moment in Mark’s Gospel, Peter had witnessed a multitude of healings, an exorcism or two, Jesus’ twice commanding the wind and the sea to be still, a child brought back from the dead, five thousand and then four thousand miraculously fed, a teacher who had authority like no other. Given the evidence, Peter must have believed he was in the company of the one whom God had sent to restore the fortunes of God’s people—and, by extension, his own. Peter must have imagined life with Jesus to be pure light, with no darkness at all, until Jesus said, in response to Peter’s confession, I am going the way of suffering and death.

Therefore, he continued, speaking now to the gathering crowd, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Unlike Elijah who commanded Elisha to stay in the safety of Gilgal and Bethel and Jericho, wanting to shield him from the dangerous and holy boundary where the heavens split to reveal God’s glory, Jesus says, leave the calculated less and more and follow me through suffering and death to the life no grave can contain.

Six days later, Mark continues, Jesus leads Peter and James and John to a high mountain, which is the boundary, in a three-storied universe, between heaven and earth, between God’s dwelling place and our own, between eternity and time. When Mark says that Jesus was

“transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them,” he is pushing words to their boundaries. In this Gospel that ends with the women running away terrified from the empty tomb, saying nothing to anyone, the Transfiguration is as close as we get to a resurrection appearance. I imagine it was a story that Jesus’ followers carried with them into the coliseum as they faced the lions and onto the crosses where they would be nailed; a story they told in the jail cells of Ephesus and Rome--and later, a story one preacher told himself in a cell in Flossenburg before he emerged to walk to his death at the end of a noose; a story told even now by believers in God who are held by ISIS, Coptic Christians slaughtered in Libya only hours ago, young men and women who quit their reasonable lives to seek God in the faces of the suffering.

“Some people find God in church,” Kayla wrote to her father on the occasion of his birthday in 2011. “Some people find God in nature. Some people find God in love. I find God in suffering. I’ve known for some time what my life work is, using my hands as tools to relieve suffering....I find God reflected in the suffering eyes reflected in mine. If this is how you are revealed to me,” she prays, “this is how I will forever seek you.”

For Kayla I think the light that shown in the darkness of captivity led her to believe the future was in God’s hand rather than her own, to believe that she was in God’s hand rather than the hand of her captors, to believe that those whose suffering had caused her not to stay home were the nearest she would ever be to the God she was born to love and serve. There is no doubt that her belief in the God, who met her on the boundary of human suffering, freed Kayla Mueller to live as though death had no dominion.

Believing on the boundaries has nothing to do with believing three impossible things about God before breakfast. Faith is the gift of a meeting that is, more often than not, given to

those whose lives have been placed on the boundary between life and death, heaven and earth, eternity and time. “There are times in every life,” poet Christian Wiman writes in the face of the boundary that is his own terminal illness, “when one is overwhelmed...by reality spilling its boundaries. It can happen when you fall in love or, after the early nullifying horror abates a bit, when the world returns sharper and starker after a dire diagnosis.” “I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator b/c literally there was no one else,” Kayla wrote, “...and by God and by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall. I have been shown light in darkness.” Believing on the boundaries: it is the gift of a meeting in which we “become free to hear the word of grace that God has spoken in Jesus Christ in such a way that, in spite of all that contradicts it, we may once for all, exclusively and entirely, hold to God’s promise and guidance.” [Karl Barth] Thanks be to God.