Preaching Notes

Transfiguration B.2015

February 15, 2015

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2 Kings 2:1-12

Change is always difficult and pastoral change, especially when the one leaving has had a long and successful tenure is particularly hard. Everyone is challenged by the situation, those who have experienced the leadership of the one who is leaving, and the one who follows in what are generally large footsteps. That is the situation of the text. The questions of what is to come and how they will continue the work of God in productive ways are foundational to all the issues and challenges that are presented to the newcomer. But what of the one who becomes the replacement for what has been in operation? How does the new leader of God’s people continue the work of God in effective ways?

In the United Methodist Church, under whose disciplines I hold my ecclesiastical credentials, clergy operate under an annual appointment system. That means that at the end of any year the appointee may find himself or herself in a new place among a new people. Certainly the episcopal authority and the appointive cabinet, who are responsible for determining where clergy are placed, believe that they are doing so under divine guidance, but often the appointed clergy finding everything except a welcome from the people and the leadership position to which they are sent are left to ponder the will or even the presence of God in their particular situation.

Elisha is agonizingly aware of the responsibility that will pass to him upon the death of his teacher and mentor Elijah. That God has been actively present in Elijah’s ministry is unquestioned and Elisha understands the expectations of the people that are placed on the prophet of God. His response to the company of prophets and to Elijah himself testifies to his recognition of the challenge that he will face once Elijah is gone. Unlike many United Methodist clergy, Elisha knows that he will succeed Elijah because of Elijah’s action of throwing his mantel on Elisha while he was busy at the task that he believed was his calling in life, namely plowing the field. And in order to be ready to do the work of prophecy he requests a double share of Elijah’s spirit in accordance with the prevailing cultural practice regarding inheritance of the first-born son in the household.

But the wisdom of Elijah prevails even in this final moment as he is being taken up by divine action. He directs his student beyond himself to the source of all power. God had ordained that Elisha succeed Elijah; God has chosen the time and method by which Elijah’s ministry will come to an end; and it is God and God alone who can give Elisha the empowerment of spirit he needs to do the work of God among the people of God. It is an important message that the preacher of this text must give to the congregation. God ordains us for whatever task God has called us to do. And that is true within, outside of, and beyond any ecclesial tasks. Whatever job we do, whether as employee or employer, it is unlikely that it is truly original. In a real sense, we follow in the paths that others have walked or may even have set, and we are called not simply to fill their footsteps, but also to tread new ground. That is the task that Elisha faces. Further, Elisha’s action of tearing his clothes was a sign of his humility before God and it provides a model for all who stand in the gap as purveyors of the gospel message. All preachers must approach the task of preaching the gospel with humble zeal and with the understanding that the message is not ours alone, that God speaks to all God’s people, and that only with God’s direction can the message be effective transported and find root in the hearts of the hearers.

A student in one of my early preaching classes interpreted Elisha’s unwillingness to heed the words of the prophets he encountered at every junction along the way to the place where Elijah was taken up, by charging the prophet with laziness. He concluded that Elisha was really unwilling to do the work that awaited him. My immediate response was utter amazement and speechlessness. However, although untrue of the prophet Elisha, it is too often true of many who are faced with the magnitude of the task of being the mouthpiece of God, and who judge themselves inadequate to the task of congregational leadership vacated by a predecessor. But when God has called and commissioned us, whether as replacement or not, know that God prepares us for the work to be done. And in order to do the work, we must stay focused and keep watching for God’s anointing presence in the places to which we are called to go.

As women and persons of color are appointed to places where white males have consistently held the pastoral leadership, it becomes an imperative that they look to God as their guide and be less concerned or committed to trying to fill the shoes of their predecessor. They cannot and will not fit. On the other hand, those who must receive the newcomers must also be willing to recognize the hand of God that has placed those new and often different persons with a spirit of acceptance and hospitality that comes by acknowledging the grace of God as the free gift to all people, regardless of origin or location. The idea of being a mentor to persons who are younger or newer in ministry is one that those who are more seasoned or have a longer tenure effective ministry should take seriously. But perhaps as or more important is the necessity to seek divine direction as one puts on the mantle of pastoral leadership and takes on the task of proclamation of God’s word to the people of God.

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

 The message of this text continues the focus that I have addressed in the Old Testament scripture, namely the need for divine direction in pastoral leadership and the proclamation of the gospel. Undoubtedly on this Transfiguration Sunday, the focus on light and the transformative nature of the gospel is one that captures the attention and it should. Undoubtedly this text has been partnered with the gospel account of Jesus' transfiguration because of the comparison of the veiling of the gospel that Paul names, and the overshadowing of the cloud that hid Moses, the representative of the Law, Elijah, the representation of the prophets, and Jesus, the gospel. There is also the presentation in some form of light that shines into the situation wherever “the glory of God is revealed in the face of Jesus Christ.” But there is beneath both the call to God to reveal to the preacher/prophet the message of the gospel that must be presented to the people.

 Transfiguration is transformation plus. It is transformation that engages and is represented in part by light. It is the light of God that must shine through the darkness that clouds the mind of those who have not yet received or accepted the light of God that is present in the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we are expected to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And Paul reminds us that our knowledge of God’s glory comes through Jesus Christ. As true followers of Christ, we are directed to ways of compassion and mercy that will enable us to see God in each and every person regardless of color or other societal definitions. The racism that exists in the church unchecked calls to the preacher for a word of justice, so that the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ can be fully unveiled. Thus its light will be allowed to shine into the dark places of our individual, societal and ecclesial lives.

African Americans often live in the cloudiness or darkness of prejudices that deny the benefit of the opportunities that come with allowing all persons to flourish in the light that represents the acknowledgement of their full humanity. The preacher’s proclamation from this text must be a call to the transfiguration of societal and ecclesial systems that are veiled or shrouded in the darkness of inequality so that all may benefit fully in the light of God’s love as it becomes present and available in the world.

Mark 9:2-9

 The story of Jesus’ transfiguration appears midway in the gospel of Mark as a point of confirmation of Jesus’ identity as Son of God. In Mark 1:11, the heavenly voice that identifies Jesus is the culminating point of his baptism by John. Here in Mark 9, following Jesus’ questioning of the disciples as to the scuttlebutt regarding his identity among the people (Mark 8), the heavenly voice also speaks. Not only does the voice confirm Jesus’s identity, but it also calls and commissions the disciples to their task as apostles. They see him changed before their eyes; they see the witnesses to his place in the divine order and they receive the divine command to follow his teaching.

 It is a moment of such magnitude that quite naturally, the disciples or at least Peter is loth to let go of it. But as with any high moments, it is fleeting. They cannot contain it, but it changes their vision in a lasting way. In the gospel of Mark, the disciples seem unable to recognize the divinity of Jesus. But here, they are told not to make public the incontrovertible proof that Jesus is Son of God. How can they not be impacted and changed, perhaps even transfigured in a much lesser way, that is experience the light of God shining in them, because of this experience? Our baptism is also a moment of transfiguration as the light of Christ shines in us as we are symbolically washed clean from our sins. The Holy Spirit is also present and speaks on our behalf claiming us as children of God and members of the body of Christ. In that awe-inspiring moment we are changed and enlightened by the grace of God that empowers our witness as to the presence of God in us. But like Peter, we must also be present to the moment, yet we cannot misread the event, and we must be fully aware of the majesty of God with us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

 And what are our moments of transfiguration? When has the light of Christ shined in us in a way that makes us see Christ in others and enables us to bring light into the lives of those who sit in darkness because of the societal systems that order or impact their lives? Further, is there danger is being so enlightened that we can no longer continue with equanimity to live our own lives while so many others sit in darkness? The preacher needs to present these life-changing questions to the congregation, but must also present the assurance of the Holy Spirit’s presence and action in bringing light out of the darkness that often overshadows the work that we do. This overshadowing is present because too often we want to hold on to the past and not bask fully in the newness of Christ’s light in and around us. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. testified to this own mountain top experience and was killed soon afterwards. Jesus knew that his journey would lead to death but also that there would be resurrection to follow. Perhaps as preachers we need to seek or claim our own experience of transfiguration so that we too can be empowered as we are commissioned to proclaim Christ, the salvation of the world, in every place. And when we have claimed the light of Christ in our work, we must offer the same light to those to whom we are called to preach.