

Divergence on the Lectionary - Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

First Reading

2 Kings 2:1–12

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. And Elijah said to Elisha, “Please 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. And the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?” And he said, “Yes, I know it; keep quiet.”

Elijah said to him, “Elisha, please 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. The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know it; keep quiet.”

Then Elijah said to him, “Please 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. Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.” And Elisha said, “Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.” And he said, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so.” And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, “My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” And he saw him no more.

Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 4:3–6

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. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 9:2–9

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

It is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany and the Sunday on which we read the stories of the Transfiguration for the first time in the church year. (The second being the Feast of the Transfiguration in August.) The lections that accompany the Transfiguration differ though. This week, presumably because Elijah is one of the two who appear with Jesus on the mountain top, we read the story of the prophet's ascension into heaven. (He and Enoch being the only two who the Bible tells us were taken to heaven without having to die.)

And yet the text we read this week is somewhat less focused on Elijah than it is on Elisha. Yes, it serves as a transition between the two prophets, the two "men of God," but the narrative is more about Elisha's doggedness in following his master and in pursuing his own "portion of the spirit" than it is about Elijah's departure. It begins with

the statement that the LORD is about to take Elijah to heaven in a whirlwind, thereby removing all the suspense about what will happen with him. So the tension in the story is about Elisha's refusal to leave his side and the question of whether or not he'll receive the "double portion" of Elijah's spirit. It's worth noting that the walk from Gilgal to Bethel includes an increase of some 4000 feet in altitude. Then they go back down the mountain to Jericho. My daughter has taken me hiking in the Rockies a lot in the last 18 months, and I've never seen an increase in altitude of 4,000 feet!

We witness Elijah's last great miracle, the stopping of the Jordan, but this act serves more as an introduction to Elisha, who repeats it, demonstrating that with Elijah's mantle that he has also received a "double" portion of Elijah's spirit.

Here it is interesting to note that there is considerable ambiguity regarding this "double portion." In those days it was customary for the first-born son to receive two thirds of his father's inheritance, and this "double portion" may have been a reference to the two thirds, thereby strengthening the father/son imagery of the relationship between the two prophets. At the same time, Elisha goes on to perform about twice as many miracles during his lifetime as Elijah did, so perhaps it does refer to "twice as much." This setting up of Elisha as the greater of the two though, seems unlikely, as the author would not have wanted to set them against one another this way. One author I read said he thought the ambiguity of the text might have been intentional.

Last among my comments I'd like to point to something really fascinating I hadn't ever read before.

As Elijah is taken into heaven, Elisha calls out, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" Except that this isn't what it says. It says "chariot," not "chariots." Apparently, in an attempt to make Elisha's exclamation fit better with the "fiery chariots" that are a part of the whirlwind that carries Elijah off, our translators have changed the singular noun to a plural one. This has the unfortunate effect of masking what Elisha really means.

You'll recall that later later in 2 Kings (13:14) as Elisha lies dying, Joash cries out the same thing, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" That should be singular too. One chariot. And there are no fiery chariots at all. Why then this cry? Simply because this exclamation, "The chariot of Israel and its horsemen" is a title given to both prophets, not a description of the chariots that came to collect Elijah.

This title actually suits Elisha better than it does Elijah. Elisha was a valued military advisor to the king, something Elijah never was. So the image of a chariot which gives military superiority to the people of Israel fits the younger prophet better. Some

commentators have suggested that the title is given to Elijah because of the way that he fought so hard for the Lord against idolatry, but that is a stretch. It is more likely that this was a title first given to Elisha and then added back into the story of the transition between the two prophets by a later hand to tie them closer together with the same title. In either case, though, Elisha isn't speaking about the fiery chariots at all when he cries out. He's calling out a title for Elijah. Our translators do us a disservice by making "chariot" into "chariots."

Second Reading

It isn't difficult to see why our lectionary choosers picked this passage from 2 Corinthians to go with the Transfiguration texts. As an Epiphany text and a Transfiguration text it fits beautifully. "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Images of light, of unveiling, revealing all fairly shout "Epiphany!" The knowledge of the Glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ evokes the image of Jesus' face as it shone on the mountaintop.

In these verses Paul wrestles with the reality that some are blinded to the glory that is revealed in Jesus' face. He attributes this to the "god of this world."

I would not have you read this passage in isolation, though. It follows closely on Paul's discussion of the veil over one's heart that is removed by Jesus, and how that enables one to read the Scriptures as God intended. That passage includes one of my favorite bits of Scripture. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." (2 Corinthians 3:17-18a, ESV)

This glory that transforms us, changes us "from glory to glory," is the same glory of which Paul speaks in the verses appointed for this Sunday.

I don't know about you, but I don't think I do nearly as much gazing on the glory revealed in Jesus' face as I might. I'm not nearly as "changed" as I'd like to be. What would life be like if we actually took time every day to gaze on the beauty and the wonder that is Jesus Christ?

Gospel Text

Our readings for the Last Sunday of Epiphany always include the Transfiguration. So we jump from chapter one to chapter nine in Mark before returning to chapter one again

next week. It would be easy to read this passage as the central passage of the whole Gospel, Jesus is transformed and acclaimed by God as the Beloved Son with the command, "Listen to Him." But for Mark, as dramatic as this is, it is only pericentral, adjacent to the real heart of Mark's Gospel and the center of his structure. The center? What came six days before.

Our reading starts off with "And after six days," but our reading doesn't tell us what it's six days after! It is six days after Jesus first predicts openly His death and resurrection, Peter's rebuke and Jesus' retort, "Get behind me Satan." It is the controversy over Jesus' death that Mark places central to his Gospel. Just as the whole Gospel is bookended by proclamations of Jesus (the Baptist at the beginning and the young man at the end), the story of Jesus revealing His identity and then proclaiming that He must be crucified is nestled between two other proclamations (Peter, "You are the Christ," and God, "This is my beloved son.") Peter gets it wrong and is scolded, just as John the Baptist got it wrong, proclaiming a "mighty one."

Going forward, the emphasis shifts from the misunderstandings of His identity by those who proclaim Him to the antagonism of those who "hold to tradition" toward Him. We could say that the first half of the Gospel is caught between two wrong proclamations (John and Peter) and the second half between two correct ones, (God and the young man.)

Coming back to our text for this week then, we see some of the characteristics of Mark's editing of Matthew (as I believe it happened). Peter speaks out of turn because he doesn't know what to say. Mark is much more willing to critique Peter than is the much more Jewish author of Matthew. Matthew has Jesus encourage the disciples with the words, "Have no fear," but Mark leaves that out. Mark seeks a harder edge to his story telling. He is less interested in comforting his readers/hearers than Matthew is.

As we find in all of the synoptic renderings of the Transfiguration, Jesus is seen in the company of Moses and Elijah, who represent both the Law and the Prophets. Luke tells us that the three spoke of Jesus' "departure," but neither Matthew nor Mark include this detail.

In all three synoptic gospels, the Transfiguration follows six days after Jesus' self-revelation which includes His crucifixion. Simply put, I believe that this was because Jesus' glorification on the mountain top would have been too easy to understand as an endorsement of His earthly reign as the kind of king that the Baptist and many Israelites hoped for. Jesus is revealed, His identity can only be understood at all in the wake of His revelation of the Cross that awaits Him.