

Transfiguration B
2 Kings 2:1-12
Mark 9:2-9
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Notes not for publication

I'm so grateful to serve in a church with so many kids and with a children's program of such depth. We live in a world where we teach our children to have very short attention spans; everything has to move fast and be loud and colorful and entertaining. We have in effect decided as a culture that the message we want to give our kids is that it is not good to go unstimulated, and artificial, profit-based stimulation is the best kind of all. We teach our kids not to listen inside, not to trust their own inner life, and to find satisfaction only in that buzzy part of the brain that's activated by sugar and TV and drugs of many sorts.

I say "we," but of course I mean only part of who we are, the official, Time Warner-sponsored public voice. What I'm grateful for is that we have a ministry in this church, and many of you have made commitments in your homes, to cultivate real life in our children, the real kind of reality that doesn't disappear when the power goes off and the batteries run down. That's part of what I see happening in Godly Play—a trust in the power of stories, first of all, the power of narrative to engage the brain and heart at a very deep level. This is the way much of the Bible is constructed, and we miss so much of its meaning and wisdom when we insist on rushing to the "moral" or the "point" of the story, as if there were just one manageable meaning that we can boil down and grasp.

Today's scriptures are very good examples of stories that are hard to boil down to a manageable point. The story of Elijah who didn't die, but who was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind in a chariot of fire, pulled by horses of fire; and the story of Jesus, who shone so brightly at the top of the mountain that it would hurt your eyes, talking with Elijah and Moses. We could ask, "What do these stories mean?" but I don't know that we would get very far. Because mainly it seems like they're better suited for us to just contemplate, rather than understand, to witness, rather than grasp. These are stories of mystery, stories that pull back the curtain on the greatness of God, the way the presence and action of God can be so wholly foreign to what we typically know or experience. Jesus' clothes were "whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them"—this is coming from someplace else; there's no reference point for us. A chariot and horses, on fire, flying through the air, coming down, out of the sky, and then going back up?

An appropriate response to this kind of text, I believe, does not include figuring it out. Did it happen? When and where? What can we then know and assume? An appropriate response is one of awe and wonder. And thus Godly Play asks the kids, "I wonder" questions. "I wonder, what would a chariot of fire look like? I wonder what would it smell like, or sound like? I wonder how we would feel to see one roaring down out of the sky? I wonder where it came from, and why it was burning? I wonder, in the story about Jesus, what he was talking about with Moses and Elijah? I wonder what it sounded like when the voice in the sky said, 'Listen to him?'"

What is important for us to remember is that kids are usually way better at “I wonder” questions than grownups are. Kids are innately spiritual; they retain a connection with wherever it is inside of God that they’ve come from. They retain that connection and awareness until we grownups, little by little, convince them that it’s not real, that the right way to see the world and hear a story is this way, and not that way. We teach them, and they want to learn from us and make us happy, and so sometimes as they get bigger they forget.

One thing I like to believe is that, even though many of us have forgotten, that connection to awe and wonder still lies deep within each of us. It is a place in us where words are often neither helpful nor necessary. It is a place of knowing that comes from experience, the experience of the ongoing, undergirding presence of God in all moments; the experience of brief encounters with God that punctuate the rest of our life. That capacity lies within us, waiting to be remembered. We can access it in basic ways, through paying attention to regular parts of our lives, simple tasks like sweeping the kitchen floor or pouring a cup of coffee, or the way our body’s senses encounter the creation—the feel of the soil in the garden, the smell of the grass freshly cut, the sound of the wind when we stop to listen. And of course there’s the way of watching a little kid interact with the world and soak up the wonders of animals and food and bath water. All can be portals to mystery and an opportunity for awe.

Lest you think I’ve gone completely sappy and sentimental, however, I want to say that there is great power and freedom in letting ourselves feel wonder in the face of mystery. One reason is that it kind of reboots us and our perspective; if we’ll let it,

mystery will shake us out of our mental rut, our typical way of perceiving things. We don't always let that happen; for example, in the case of the story of Jesus on the mountain, Peter has trouble just letting the moment be. He talks and makes plans and thinks of building something to commemorate the event, even though the text says he didn't know what to say for being terrified. That's what we do—we can't bear the silence, feel uncomfortable with not grasping, so we launch into action or into talking. If we'll let it, though, the spectacle of light and mystery and whatever else fills the moment can crack us open and show us a new thing.

Peter on the mountain says, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here." And indeed today, it is good to be here, to seek the presence of God again. But it's so funny, I love the fact that in this story, Peter is talking without knowing what he's saying, and a voice comes from heaven and says to listen to Jesus. It is good to be here, to take in the revelation again. But if we listen to Jesus, he will not allow us to stay here. For the journey to Jerusalem lies ahead of him, and ahead of us. This Wednesday we will begin the season of Lent, marking our heads with ashes once more, to remind ourselves of the humility required to walk with Jesus. And the fact is, humility and wonder are closely related. Wonder makes us available for humility, and humility can make us available for service.

And God knows the world needs servants. There is so much pain around us—I heard this week of a young soldier who took his own life less than a month from the end of his tour of duty. This week I visited a baby in the hospital, a woman dying of cancer, a woman whose marriage suddenly disintegrated. There is so much pain in the

world, so many who need something more substantial than the sugar-coated, electronic, commercial junk we hear again and again is supposed to fill us up and satisfy our need. What we need is much deeper, much more complex, much more powerful, much more hopeful, much more light-filled, much more transfiguring and transformational. We need an encounter with God; we need to see the face of Jesus.

Serving the world is one more way to encounter the wonder of the presence of God. When we reach out to the hurting and the hungry, Christ says he will meet us there. You might even decide to learn Godly Play with the kids, serving them and yourself at the same time, putting yourself in the path of the mysteries of God, the stories whose meaning we may not completely grasp, but which hold life for us.