

“Elijah Ascended”

2 Kings 2:1-12 • Psalm 50:1-6 • 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 • Mark 9:2-9

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

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Transfiguration of the Lord

Today is the day in the church calendar called “Transfiguration of the Lord.” We’re recalling the story – recorded in three of the gospels – of Jesus having a significant mountaintop experience, while Peter and James and John looked on. This is one of ten events in the life of Jesus that are so significant that many branches of the Christian church commemorate them every single year. We all know about Christmas and Easter and many others, but the Transfiguration of Jesus is less well known. When I was talking about this story with the youth of our church a few months ago, one of the high school students commented that she had never heard this story before. I suspect that’s the case for many adults as well. Even those who have heard the story may not understand its significance; it took me *years* to figure out why this story is so important. Now I think it’s one of the most important stories in the whole Bible.

Seven people, or beings, appear in this story. There’s Jesus, of course. There are three of his twelve apostles. There are two significant figures from the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. And there is God. I want to spend some time today exploring *one* of those seven in some depth, and then come back to this story. Most of us are pretty familiar with Moses, the great lawgiver; he led the Israelites out of slavery, through the wilderness, and to the Promised Land; along the way he brought the Israelites to the foot of Mount Sinai, where they beheld the majesty of God and heard the words of God. That’s all familiar territory for most of us. But Elijah is less well known – there were never any blockbuster movies about him. Let’s take a few minutes to consider why *he* is important enough to show up in this story.

Elijah shows up very suddenly and without any introduction in the 17th chapter of the book of 1 Kings in the Old Testament: “Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.’” Let’s start with the first few words. Elijah is called a “Tishbite,” of “Tishbe in Gilead.” Gilead was a region east of the Jordan River, in what is now the country of Jordan; it is a lovely mountainous region. It seems there was once a small town here called “Tishbe,” whose inhabitants were called “Tishbites,” though there are no other mentions of Tishbe anywhere in the Old Testament, and nobody is called a “Tishbite” other than Elijah. But the evidence suggests that Elijah came from this place. We know nothing certain about Elijah’s heritage, his parents, or his early life; he just suddenly ... *appears*.

He appears at a pivotal time in the history of Israel. It was about 900 years before Jesus, and the country had split into two separate kingdoms, the Kingdom of Judah in the south, and the Kingdom of Israel in the north. The king of Israel was named Ahab. Ahab had secured a political alliance with the Kingdom of Tyre, to the north of Israel, by marrying a princess named Jezebel. Jezebel did not worship the God of the Jews; she worshiped a god named Ba’al and a goddess named Asherah. Ahab built a

temple for Jezebel's gods in the Israelite capital, and she – or perhaps they – encouraged Israelites to abandon the God of the Jews and to worship Ba'al and Asherah instead. Then Jezebel began killing the prophets of God. The Israelite religion was under attack. Who would come to its rescue?

Enter Elijah, the single remaining faithful prophet of God. 1 Kings tells us several stories about him. Elijah declared that God would withhold the rain from Israel, leading to a major drought that afflicted the kingdom for several years. God advised Elijah to take refuge east of the Jordan River, where ravens brought him meat and bread. Then, God sent Elijah north to a town belonging to the Kingdom of Sidon, to a particular household where a widow and her son lived. They were as hungry as Elijah was, and God provided for all three of them. When the widow's son took ill and died, Elijah prayed, and God restored the child to life. That's the first instance in the Bible of someone coming back from the dead. Then, God directed Elijah to return to Israel and challenge Ahab to a duel: 450 prophets of Ba'al and 400 prophets of Asherah on side, and Elijah alone on the other. Two altars were prepared, with wood ready for burning. Elijah said, "you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." When the prophets of Ba'al called on their god, nothing happened; but when Elijah prayed to the Lord, the wood burst into flame. "When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.'" Elijah ordered the arrest of all the false prophets, then he executed them. The rains came, and the drought ended.

But Jezebel was furious; she wanted Elijah dead. He fled south, all the way through both Israel and Judah; an angel ministered to him, and after forty days and nights he reached Mount Sinai – the very mountain where Moses and the Israelites had encountered God hundreds of years earlier. This is the only time in the Bible that any Israelite ever returned to Mount Sinai. There, Elijah has his own encounter with God: "Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." God then sends him on several new missions. The details get complicated, but Elijah keeps doing as God bids, in the face of enormous opposition.

One of the things God told Elijah to do was to "anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place." Elijah finds Elisha – he was plowing a field with twelve yoke of oxen – and summons him to follow him, which he does. That brings us to the passage you heard earlier, in which Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan river, and something remarkable happens: "As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven." Elisha assumes Elijah's mantle, assuming the responsibility of shepherding the spiritual life of the people of Israel, and eventually Jezebel's reign of terror comes to an end.

So there are several important things to note about Elijah: (1) he was a faithful prophet, boldly proclaiming the Word of God to a people who didn't always want to hear it, and to political rulers who stood in opposition to it; (2) he was nourished and supported by an angel of God in his time of desperation and need; (3) he was called by God to labor both within and beyond the borders of Israel, for God's love knows no bounds; (4) he brought someone back from the dead; (5) he had a powerful experience of God on a mountaintop; (6) he performed numerous miracles (most commentators count about seven or eight); and (7) he called someone to follow him, and to take over when he was gone. *Every single one of those statements is also true about Jesus. Every single one! Much of what Jesus did*

in his ministry is rooted and grounded in the ministry of Elijah, nine centuries before Jesus. Jesus even compares himself to Elijah, when he stands up in the synagogue in Nazareth and boldly proclaims, “the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.” Elijah was a *precursor* of Jesus, a harbinger of what was to come. Elijah even ascended directly from earth to heaven, as Jesus himself would ultimately do.

In the centuries after Elijah, Jews came to believe that Elijah would one day return. The book of Malachi – the last book in the Old Testament – ends with God saying these words: “I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” To this day, at Jewish circumcision ceremonies, a chair is set aside for use by Elijah; and at the annual Jewish Passover Seder meal, a cup of wine is set at the table for him. The expectation is that Elijah *will someday return*. We Christians, on the other hand, would say that Elijah has *already* come: in the Gospels, Jesus clearly identifies John the Baptist as Elijah, heralding the coming of the Messiah.

So now, let’s return to the mountaintop in Galilee that is the focal point of the Transfiguration story. Jesus and three of his disciples are up there, and suddenly “he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.” Jesus has a mystical conversation with the two greatest spiritual leaders in the history of Israel: Moses, the great lawgiver; and Elijah, the great prophet. We can only imagine what transpired in that conversation. Jesus stood squarely in their footsteps – giving authoritative spiritual teachings, like Moses; performing miracles and giving life to the dead, like Elijah. Were there things Jesus needed to learn from them? Or that *they* needed to learn from *him*?

Which brings us to the critical question: *why is this story so important?* I think that question has two answers. The first has to do with *whatever was going on in that conversation*. This is the most mystical moment anywhere between baptism of Jesus – when the Spirit of God alights on him – and the death of Jesus – when he breathes his last. *Something happened in that conversation*. Something, I suspect, that gave Jesus courage and clarity to *continue* his ministry, and bring it towards *completion*. There’s a reason why we hear this story every year just on the cusp of Lent: *this is the beginning of the second half of Jesus’ ministry*. From this point forward, we are heading towards the cross.

The second reason why this story is important is because of what it reaffirms for *us*. We read: “A cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” We readers have heard that voice before, at the baptism of Jesus. But for Peter and James and John, that was a new experience; they weren’t present when Jesus was baptized; they were fishing in the Sea of Galilee. They *needed* to hear God’s voice speaking with such clarity. “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” *We, also*, need to hear God’s voice speaking with clarity. There are all sorts of people clamoring for our attention, all kinds of voices in this world begging us to follow; advertisers have spent an average of *seven million dollars for thirty seconds of air time* in today’s big game. *Seven million dollars, apiece!* That’s a lot of money, just to try to get our attention. But God didn’t spend a *dime*. God just gave us a Messiah; and God said to us, with crystal clarity, “This is my Son, the Beloved; *listen to him!*” That’s the crux of the matter. That’s what it all boils down to. Will we, or won’t we, truly *listen*?

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