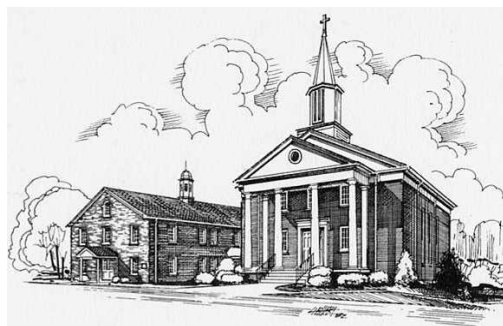


Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Year B

RCL



Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalms 147:1-12, 21c

Mark 1:29-39

The Collect

The Collect

O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Kings 2:1-12

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

Elijah said to him, “Elisha, 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 company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him,

“Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”

Then Elijah said to him, “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 company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you,

it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” 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 kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Psalm 50:1-6

Deus deorum

- 1 The LORD, the God of gods, has spoken; *
he has called the earth from the rising of the sun to
its setting.
- 2 Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty, *
God reveals himself in glory.
- 3 Our God will come and will not keep silence; *
before him there is a consuming flame,
and round about him a raging storm.
- 4 He calls the heavens and the earth from above *
to witness the judgment of his people.
- 5 “Gather before me my loyal followers, *
those who have made a covenant with me
and sealed it with sacrifice.”
- 6 Let the heavens declare the rightness of his cause; *
for God himself is judge.

The Epistle

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

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 we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Mark 9:2-9

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after

the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

SERMON

I probably should have mentioned this during Announcements, but I can do it now. I've decided on some changes to our church. I haven't discussed them with Session, but I don't think I have to. Let me line them out:

1. I'm changing the time of service from Sunday to Friday night, to bring us into sync with Shabbos, as it was in Jesus' time.

2. We need a formalized dress code, so congregants will wear costumes consistent with those who heard Jesus speak or who read Paul's letters. The women, of course, will cover their hair, as is befitting them.

3. I will, in the next week, discard our hymnals in favor of the Psalter in Hebrew, copies of which I have ordered at church expense.

4. Finally, we'll no longer need an organ, so I've

hired a bagpiper. No reason. I just like bagpipes.

As we work our way through this sermon, I want you to hold onto your thoughts about these alterations to our traditions, for today, I want to talk about change in the church.

“Change” is not something we in the church like to contemplate. We glory in “the way things have always been”. It’s a comfort to go to a familiar worship space, hear beloved hymns, see our friends and family, have a nice nap while the preacher goes on and on, then leave feeling refreshed and, most importantly, reassured that our world is stable. We feel we have had a part in eternity. We do NOT want to entertain any thought of moving toward eternity. That’s why pulpit search committees all have that same sour expression on their faces across denominational differences. One of my favorite cartoons shows a pulpit search committee summarizing

their decision as, “So, we’re agreed. We want a young pastor with new ideas who won’t change anything.”

“Change” is not something we in the church like to contemplate, but change is the one constant factor in the Good News. The church is to proclaim the gospel, and to move us forward to the return of Jesus. The church is all about change! We are moving from an imperfect world to the world to come, the second coming, the eschaton. When we insist that nothing ever change, we are rejecting the very meaning of the Gospel – the Good News – AND we’re saying that the way it has always been trumps God’s divine plan. THIS is the end times. THIS is as good as it is going to get.

Our first reading today was from Elijah. Elijah was a prophet and a miracle worker who lived in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab in the

9th century BC¹. He is also portrayed as leading a school of prophets known as “the sons of the prophets”. In terms of change within the church, the handing over of leadership of the sons of the prophets from Elijah to his disciple Elisha was a pretty big change. You’d have to search far and wide to find anything more theatrical than our passage today.

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 kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!”

Elijah, the leader of the sons of the prophets, God’s appointed one to oppose evil King Ahab, the very voice of God in his time is drawn alive out of the world in a whirlwind. What is to happen to the sons of the prophets now? Who will lead them? What will happen

¹ William F. Albright dated his reign to 869–850 BC, while E. R. Thiele offered the dates 874–853 BC. Most recently, Michael D. Coogan has dated Ahab’s reign to 871–852 BC.

now? The greatest change imaginable to the people of Elijah's time has happened, but far from being the end, this change presages the future. We know that Elijah's going and the appointment of Elisha manifested God's movement toward the coming of Jesus. To the people of the time, it must have been terrifying. We can only appreciate the ascension of Elijah in the light of the Transfiguration of Jesus and the people of Elijah's time knew nothing of the Transfiguration of Jesus, for it hadn't happened yet. Any point in history can be, and usually is, simultaneously the cause of our great fear and the movement of the world toward God's eschaton – the final event in the divine plan.

It's easy to overlook the mutual echos of this story with that of Jesus. The Book of Malachi prophesies Elijah's return "before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD", making him a harbinger of the Mes-

siah and of the End Times. Sure enough, in the Transfiguration, Mark tells us:

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Nearly nine hundred years before Jesus, an event of terrifying import happened which is now revealed as part of the divine plan, as the continuation of a story that will involve great change and upset. Change is the path towards the coming of the kingdom, and we oppose it at our peril.

I had a very useful discussion with my friend, Rev. Dr. Ike Nicholson this week about church culture. You don't have to hang around churches very long before you notice that each church has a particular set of gifts

or culture which defines it. That's the point in our discussion that I started bragging on you guys. You named this church very well, for it is, indeed, a community. At lunch the other day, Kat said the same, that she loves this church because it is so kind and friendly. That is your gift, your charism. Galatians defines nine gifts of the Spirit. We're not a charismatic congregation, but think about your experience with this church as you hear of the gifts of the spirit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. ²

Are we not blessed with these gifts in abundance? Are we not the very embodiment of the gifts of the spirit? Is that not what the sons of the prophets thought of Elijah? Could they envision anyone more representative of God's way than their powerful leader, Elijah? Neither

² Galatians 5:22-23 NIV

Elijah nor Community Presbyterian Church of Bellefonte, Kentucky represent God's last word. For God's kingdom to come, for His will to be done, change must happen, and that includes us. Our human need for stability leads us to a static view of our churches. God's divine plan is dynamic and requires change. We move through change in faith.

The change I'm speaking of is much more frightening than having to learn Hebrew. I'm speaking of the day, not too far in the future, when this church community will be swept up in a whirlwind. We are an older congregation. When we stand for hymns, our knees sound like castanets. I have dementia. It could overtake me at any time. One by one, each of us will be carried off into glory and the witness of this wonderful congregation will fade, but not disappear, for by its existence this church and its congregation have left their indelible

mark upon the future. God has the last word, and that last word has not been spoken. When God has His say, those who hear it will look backwards and see that the witness of this congregation was not without purpose, but rather was a part of God's walk, proclaimed from the beginning. They will see that each of you was part of that journey, and played your part, just as did Elijah, and just as did his successor, Elisha.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

Let that be our prayer as well, that those who follow us inherit a double share, the share of an heir, that the work of this church may contribute to the coming of the kingdom, even after its doors close and we are past.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Paul Smith wrote, “Christianity began in Palestine as an experience, it moved to Greece and became a philosophy, it moved to Italy and became an institution, it moved to Europe and became a culture, and it moved to America and became a business! We’ve left the experience long behind.” At each turning point, we turned our focus from the experience of God toward calcification of the past, a monument to those who first had the experience. It is we who blind ourselves.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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