

“Down From The Mountain”

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2 Kings 1:2-15
Mark 9:2-29

And [Jesus] answered them,

“O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?”

Mark 9:19

Let us pray... O God,

Come down from on high and bear with us.

Bring us up to your vantage point for how we should live by word and deed.

Make us more like you, casting out evil spirits, trusting more and arguing less.

Amen

The Falcon Heavy launch was a refreshing alternative to the news this week, allowing us to escape ‘*the surly bonds of earth, And [dance] the skies on laughter-silvered wings*’

to quote the poem, “High Flight”, by pilot, John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

So now, a rocket carrying a Tesla roadster, manned by a crash dummy named,

‘Starman’ is heading for the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter –

as kind of an advance greeter for Earth, perpetually orbiting the Sun.

Sometimes we need the perspective of something glorious, high and lifted up

to believe there is something greater than the mundane or tragic stuff of life.

The Transfiguration seems to be in the Synoptic Gospels for that purpose

with its spectacular display of Jesus clothed in radiance and in his presence

the fellowship of the great heroes of Judaism, and a theophany from God.

But why is the Transfiguration placed in the middle of the stories about Jesus?

I believe the death of John the Baptist was the turning point for Jesus’ ministry

which was followed by the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on the sea.

These actions lead up to the Transfiguration as the climactic event

before his decision to go to Jerusalem to confront the powers,

absorb their malice, and rise again just like the truth.

All these spectacular events seem to be meant as affirmations of Jesus’ power,

though, it is not clear if they were simply to bolster Jesus’ courage,

or to give the disciples vivid memories of Jesus’ true identity

to help them recover from the terrible events ahead.

After the miraculous display of the Transfiguration,

he comes down the mountain and to go into the valley, back into the fray –

where he will commit himself to go to Jerusalem...

Two concepts of Christ are represented in these two stories

which are found in the same order in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

They link that aspect of Jesus who is both the ‘Son of God’ and the ‘Son of Man’.

Another way of talking about this is the ‘Theology of Glory’

and the ‘Theology of the Cross’.

Willard, p.2

The Theology of Glory anticipates Jesus seated on the throne of heaven, judging the world with righteous judgment as 'Christos Pantocrator' – literally 'Christ Almighty'.

It is an image that we generally expect to be about what God is like – the King of kings and Lord of lords – yet one that quickly gets appropriated to portray God as a harsh Judge.

Those self-righteous servants who look at God this way, are hard-wired to punishing those who fall short of the 'glory of God' based on standards of purity – rather than love.

A more accurate lesson we can learn from the Transfiguration is in the revelation of Jesus' true nature as an exalted and enlightened being, and that if there is any aspect of this side of Jesus we are to imitate, it is in being who you are and living an authentic life.

In this way, we should all strive to be like Jesus – which is to say, to truly be you by letting go of what is false and hurtful.

By so doing, we allow the Spirit of Holiness, the Law of wisdom – Rational Loving-kindness to work through us.

The Theology of the Cross is about God who suffers with us through Christ. Not 'Jesus meek and mild', but as someone who had self-control and extraordinary talents for speaking and healing.

He was a fully balanced person who demonstrated humility and humanity, courage and vulnerability.

Again, these are aspects of God through Christ that each of us should aspire to imitate.

As the story continues we see Jesus as the personification of God who comes down from the mountain into the valley – to be with us.

Jesus urges the disciples not to speak about what they have seen until after the 'Son of Man' has been raised from death.

They don't talk about these matters directly, yet they slip in a question about Elijah – whom they had just seen talking to Jesus.

Jesus answers their question that Elijah returns first – and adds 'to restore all things'.

But then he speaks as if he is an actor in a play, stepping aside to talk to the audience, "How is it written that the Son of Man, the true Heir of Humanity, must suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"

Then, he tells the disciples that Elijah has already come – and we presume he means John the Baptist.

Again, it is as if he seems to step aside, and say, "Yet they did to him whatever they wanted – for so it is written of him."

Willard, p.3

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John get to the bottom of the mountain,
they see a crowd gathered around the other 9 disciples.

It turns out that the disciples were arguing with them over what to do
about a child with epilepsy – whom they all think is possessed by a demon...

Contemporary scholar, Dominic Crossan, has the theory that the reason why
there are so many demon-possessed people in the Christian 'New Testament'
and none to speak of in the Hebrew 'Old Testament',
is that demonic-possession symbolizes the effects of political occupation
on an oppressed people.

It is a symbolic way of talking about
the insanity and criminality and diseased way of life that happens
when people are literally scapegoated and punished and suppressed.

Here is a quote from the internet by Dominic Crossan that speaks generally
to this and how we ought to be looking at the Bible...

*My point once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories
and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically,
but that they told them symbolically
and we are dumb enough to take them literally.*

http://www.azquotes.com/author/33880-John_Dominic_Crossan

Let's cut to the scripture lesson from 2nd Kings...

The corrupt reign of King Ahab & Queen Jezebel has been replaced
by their corrupt son, King Ahaziah.

Just as the Moabites are threatening the land of Israel with war,
it so happens that Ahaziah was injured in a fall.

Instead of turning to God for healing mercy,

he sends messengers to inquire about his fate
through the Canaanite god of his mother Jezebel,

Baal or Baalzebul which to them meant, 'Lord of the Heavenly Manor'.

The Bible refers to this so-called god by using the Israelite's derogatory term,
Baalzebul or 'Lord of the Flies' and by Jesus' time,
that also meant 'Prince of the Demons'.

Ahaziah's messengers are intercepted by the Prophet Elijah
who gives them bad news for their king.

When Ahaziah hears this bad news as *news* he doesn't want to hear,
he sends a company of his soldiers to bring Elijah back.

Well this does not go well for those soldiers,

and not for the second group, as Elijah is a warrior-prophet
with fiery air support from God.

The third company that was sent has a captain who was a little more
diplomatic, begging Elijah to come with him.

Willard, p.4

The angel of God tells Elijah it is safe to go, so he does.

Elijah meets King Ahaziah, tells him he's going to die, and so he does.

A lot of violence, but Elijah was a warrior-prophet confronting two-legged enemies and did not even entertain any thought for the possibility of supernatural ones.

There was a lot of violence in Moses' day as well –

where Moses himself killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew,

and he permitted violence later on

during the Exodus into the Sinai wilderness.

But through Moses came the Law – with the love for God and love for one's neighbor as well as love for oneself, woven into it.

For this is its power as a true witness of God a loving God.

Jesus was a 'warrior', too, as someone like the prophets of old,

who sought and fought to readjust the vision of his followers

about who God is and what it means to serve and even fight for God.

Sometimes we think there are two versions of God –

one of the so-called 'Old Testament' and the other of the 'New'.

But Jesus came to show us that God was always about justice and peace

and nonviolence – fiery airstrikes from above notwithstanding, for Jesus said,

“Don't you know what Spirit you are of?”

and that it is time for humanity to grow up.

In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is described as a warrior

who slew armies with the 'sword of his mouth'.

As it is written in Revelation 19: 11-15[RSV]

¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse!

He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True,

and in righteousness he judges and makes war.

¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems;

and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself.

¹³ He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is

The Word of God.

¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure,

followed him on white horses.

¹⁵ From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations,

and he will rule them with a rod of iron;

he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed,

King of kings and Lord of lords.

The 'sword of his mouth', he is 'called Faithful and True',

he is called 'The Word of God' – that is who Jesus is,

coming down the mountain to fight for us and get us to fight for ourselves the way he does, nonviolently with words and deeds.

Willard, p.5

The comedian Jimmy Fallon dusted off an old Bob Dylan song
and updated it for our time:

*Come gather round people wherever you roam
And admit that our country don't feel like our home
And that silence speaks louder than those who condone
If a tweet to you is worth favin'
Then lift up your voices and put down your phones
For the times they are a-changin'*

*Come women and men who hashtag Me Too
And believe me when I say that we believe you
For weak is the man who calls truth "fake news"
Time's up, our silence we're breaking
And even though Mel Gibson was in Daddy's Home 2
Well the times they are a-changin'*

*Come athletes with platforms throughout the land
Who by taking a knee are taking a stand
And before you shout out that they should be banned
Listen to what they are saying
Perhaps they'd stand up if you reached out your hand
Well the times they are a-changing*

*Come journalists, writers who report the facts
And brandish your pen to fend off his attacks
Look past what he says and look at how he acts
The fire and fury is raging
For his words can hurt, but your words can fight back
New York Times, they aren't a-failin'*

*Come leaders who bully like Internet trolls
We'll curse you with four-letter words 'love' and 'hope'
For we will go high even when you go low
The order is re-arranging
For you have the power, but we have the vote
The times they are a-changin'*

Jesus came down the mountain and he drove out the evil spirit with his words.

He took the child by the hand and lifted that person up.

The disciples were frustrated, but he chided them for getting caught up
and hypnotized by endless arguments,

and when they asked how to do what he was doing, Jesus said,
"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting."

Faith and hard work, words and deeds.

Amen

Our lesson from 2 Kings 1:2-15 – as it is found in the Common English Version, describes the Prophet Elijah’s no-nonsense treatment of those who follow false gods and are arrogant...

- 1-2 Soon after King Ahab of Israel died,
the country of Moab rebelled against his son King Ahaziah.
One day, Ahaziah fell through the wooden slats around the porch
on the flat roof of his palace in Samaria, and he was badly injured.
So he sent some messengers to the town of Ekron with orders
to ask the god if he would get well.
- 3 About the same time, an angel from the LORD
sent Elijah the prophet from Tishbe to say to the king’s messengers,
“Ahaziah has rejected Israel’s own God
by sending you to ask Baalzebub about his injury.
4 Tell him that because he has done this, he’s on his deathbed!
And Elijah did what he was told.
- 5 When the messengers returned to Ahaziah, he asked,
“Why are you back so soon?”
- 6 “A man met us along the road with a message for you from the LORD,”
they answered. “The LORD wants to know why you sent us
to ask Baalzebub about your injury
and why you don’t believe there’s a God in Israel.
The man also told us that the LORD says you’re going to die.”
- 7 “What did the man look like?”
Ahaziah asked.
- 8 “He was hairy and had a leather belt around his waist,”
they answered.
“It must be Elijah!”
replied Ahaziah.
- 9 So at once he sent an army officer and fifty soldiers
to meet Elijah.
Elijah was sitting on top of a hill at the time.
The officer went up to him and said,
“Man of God, the king orders you to come down and talk with him.”
- 10 “If I am a man of God,” Elijah answered,
“God will send down fire on you and your fifty soldiers.”
Fire immediately came down from heaven
and burned up the officer and his men.

- ¹¹ Ahaziah sent another officer and fifty more soldiers to Elijah.
The officer said,
“Man of God, the king orders you to come see him right now.”
- ¹² “If I am a man of God,” Elijah answered,
“fire will destroy you and your fifty soldiers.”
And God sent down fire from heaven on the officer and his men.
- ¹³ Ahaziah sent a third army officer and fifty more soldiers.
This officer went up to Elijah,
then he got down on his knees and begged,
“Man of God, please be kind to me and these fifty servants of yours.
Let us live!
- ¹⁴ Fire has already wiped out the other officers and their soldiers.
Please don’t let it happen to me.”
- ¹⁵ The angel from the LORD said to Elijah,
“Go with him and don’t be afraid.”
So Elijah got up and went with the officer.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Mark 9:2-29

- ² And after six days 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,
³ and his garments became glistening, intensely white,
as no fuller on earth could bleach them.
- ⁴ And there appeared to them Eli'jah with Moses;
and they were talking to Jesus.
- ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus,
"Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths,
one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah."
- ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid.
⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud,
"This is my beloved Son; listen to him."
- ⁸ And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them
but Jesus only.
- ⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain,
he charged them to tell no one what they had seen,
until the Son of man should have risen from the dead.
- ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves,
questioning what the rising from the dead meant.
- ¹¹ And they asked him,
"Why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?"
- ¹² And he said to them,
"Eli'jah does come first to restore all things;
and how is it written of the Son of man,
that he should suffer many things
and be treated with contempt?"
- ¹³ But I tell you that Eli'jah has come,
and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."
- ¹⁴ And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd about them,
and scribes arguing with them.
- ¹⁵ And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed,
and ran up to him and greeted him.
- ¹⁶ And he asked them,
"What are you discussing with them?"
- ¹⁷ And one of the crowd answered him,
"Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit;
¹⁸ and wherever it seizes him, it dashes him down;
and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid;
and I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."

- ¹⁹ And he answered them,
 “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?
 How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.”
- ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him; and when the spirit saw him,
 immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about,
 foaming at the mouth.
- ²¹ And Jesus asked his father,
 “How long has he had this?”
And he said,
 “From childhood.
²² And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him;
 but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.”
- ²³ And Jesus said to him,
 “If you can! All things are possible to him who believes.”
- ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said,
 “I believe; help my unbelief!”
- ²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together,
 he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it,
 “You dumb and deaf spirit,
 I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again.”
- ²⁶ And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out,
 and the boy was like a corpse; so that most of them said,
 “He is dead.”
- ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up,
 and he arose.
- ²⁸ And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately,
 “Why could we not cast it out?”
- ²⁹ And he said to them,
 “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer [and fasting].”

“High Flight” by Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr.,
an American serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force who died on training
mission in 1941

*"Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds -
and done a hundred things You have not dreamed of -
wheeled and soared and swung high in the sunlit silence.
Hovering there I've chased the shouting wind along
and flung my eager craft through footless halls of air.
"Up, up the long delirious burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
where never lark, or even eagle, flew;
and, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
the high untrespassed sanctity of space,
put out my hand and touched the face of God."
<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/highflig.htm>*

“Beowulf”

’Twas a fearful affliction to the friend of the Scyldings
The king and his council deliberate in vain.
Soul-crushing sorrow. Not seldom in private
Sat the king in his council; conference held they
What the braves should determine ’gainst terrors unlooked for.
They invoke the aid of their gods.
60
At the shrines of their idols often they promised
Gifts and offerings, earnestly prayed they
The devil from hell would help them to lighten
Their people’s oppression. Such practice they used then,
Hope of the heathen; hell they remembered
65
In innermost spirit, God they knew not,
The true God they do not know.
Judge of their actions, All-wielding Ruler,
No praise could they give the Guardian of Heaven,
The Wielder of Glory. Woe will be his who
Through furious hatred his spirit shall drive to
70
The clutch of the fire, no comfort shall look for,
Wax no wiser; well for the man who,
Living his life-days, his Lord may face
And find defence in his Father’s embrace!
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16328/16328-h/16328-h.htm>