

### *Turning Points*

February 15, 2015 2 Kings 2:1-14, Mark 9:2-9

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Turning points. Those markers in life that divide time, divide our lives into segments. In our house, there is a common turning point we label as "BS". No, I don't mean the usual translation of BS, but rather 'before Scott' meaning that time of life before Scott joined us on the journey. Lots of life happened BS, and we will fondly mark an event as BS, saying 'it was BS', quickly interpreting for outsiders that this was 'before Scott' came along.

Think about your own life. What are the turning points, and how do you mark them? For many of us that have moved around, cities or states may be markers of turning points. Or perhaps jobs indicate major turning points in your life. Certainly marriages and the births of children or grand children are usual turning points. Maybe, like me, you made a major career shift at some point, that now divides your life into different chapters. A death or divorce may be your turning point, that place in your life where sadness and struggle were parts of a journey that led you to a new life. There may be dramatic turning points; places where you found sobriety, near death experiences, traumatic accidents, and catastrophic illnesses are turning points for many.

The point of a turning point, no pun intended, is that life takes on a new direction, perhaps a new meaning, a new joy or urgency. We are no longer marching in the same direction as we were previously. Many turning points bring up feelings of renewed hope or purpose for us. Today's two texts are just such stories. Dramatic turning points in the lives of some very important biblical characters. Let's take a closer look at each.

It is common to focus on that blazing chariot of fire in our 2 King's story. Even if we don't know much about Elijah, many of us recognize the chariot of fire that transports him to the heavens and out of this world. But if we really paid attention to what Linda read this morning, this is much more a story about Elisha and a major turning point in his life as well as the life of Israel. Elijah is the wizened prophet, with years of proclamation behind him. Elisha is the student, the learner at Elijah's feet. We come into the story on the day that Elijah is to 'die' or to be taken from this world.

It is a humorous tale in some ways. Elisha follows Elijah around like a lost puppy. From Gilgal to Bethel. From Bethel to Jericho. From Jericho to the banks of the Jordan. At each stop, Elijah instructs Elisha to stay put. And at each stop, Elisha protests and follows along anyway. As well, each stop brings confirmation from other prophets that this is the day, the day that the Lord is planning on taking Elijah. 'Ah....don't you know?' they ask Elisha. 'Shush!' Elisha tells each of the bearers of such bad news. Be quiet! I don't want to talk about this. I don't want to hear about this! As if he could stave off the inevitable.

And of course, the inevitable does happen. Elijah is carried off in a blaze of glory. Elisha is left on the banks of the Jordan to watch as his beloved mentor leaves him alone, a cautious and quiet group of prophets standing on the other bank observing. And so Elisha picks up Elijah's cast off coat, the translation calls it his mantle, and immediately steps into the sandals of his beloved prophet. He rolls up the mantle, and in Elijah fashion, reminiscent of Moses, he parts the waters of the Jordan, and becomes the prophet heir apparent. Yes, all those advising prophets were correct, this was indeed, the day the Lord would take Elijah. But it was also the day the Lord would provide a new prophet for the people; Elisha. It was a turning point for Israel, a time to let go of Elijah as the bearer of God's words and welcome Elisha to that ministry. It was a personal turning point for Elisha; that time when he was no

longer the follower, the student, but the one who would hear and share God's word himself. And a little footnote; this is where the phrase 'the passing of the mantle' originates!

Now, for our New Testament heroes, it was key that Elijah never died, but was instead taken up in that blaze of Glory. Jake shared some of the continuing practices around that belief in the Jewish tradition. But basically, because he never 'died', Elijah was available, if you will, for God to send back to earth when the time was right. That time, according to Mark, as well as Matthew and Luke, was in this mountaintop experience of Jesus' that we call the Transfiguration. Jesus, Peter, James and John have hiked up to the top of the mountain. And while up there, well you know, the usual thing happens. Jesus is transfigured before their very eyes. He glows like the sun. His clothes blaze as white as snow. It's your usual transfiguring experience. And who shows up? Well, Elijah and Moses. They have a jolly time with Jesus, while the three disciples watch on trembling in fear, because after all, it is your usual transfiguring experience, which turns out, is not so usual after all!

That alone is probably enough material for years and years of sermons. And since we will have years and years to look at that event, today I want to look more at this event as another turning point. If you have not read Mark's gospel as a nice little short story, I encourage you to do so. It is an easy read in one sitting. And Mark is a masterful story teller with an efficiency of words. I like to joke that he is our Dragnet writer. Remember that old old television show? "Just the facts" was the tagline of the main detective, and Mark would have fit right in. His tale is sparse and clipped in places. He lacks the imagery and details of Luke. But he has crafted his gospel with great literary care, and one could spend hours and hours studying just the structure of his story.

And if you did that, you would find that today's story, the Transfiguration, is indeed, the turning point of Mark's entire gospel. It's all downhill from here, both literally and figuratively. Jesus will come down from this mountaintop experience, descending the mountain and picking up his daily life as usual. Unfortunately, that daily life as usual leads straight to the cross. The unraveling and downward spiral of the events of Jesus' life begin right after the Transfiguration. This is the great turning point of Mark's gospel. The rest of the story turns towards Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week. Of course, those Holy Week events also end on a mountain top. Jesus will be found hanging on a cross atop the mount of Calvary. This time, his glory obstructed by the darkness of the day, by the grim realities of crucifixion.

This is why this Feast of the Transfiguration sits where it does in our liturgical year, in our church calendar. Not only is the story the turning point in Mark's gospel, but it is also the turning point in our seasons of faith. The Transfiguration is the hinge between Epiphany, the season after Christmas, and Lent, the season before Easter, which begins this Wednesday. The Transfiguration is a turning point for Peter, James and John, it is a turning point for us as well.

Turning points. They can be incredible gifts in our lives, but most of us don't enter them easily. We like what we know. We hold onto what is familiar, even if it's not good for us. We cling even when God asks us to let go and trust. Elisha couldn't bear to hear it was the day of Elijah's departure. He hushed everyone who dared walk close to the subject. He thought he could hold it a bay, hold onto Elijah a bit longer. Peter, in all his terror at the top of the mountain, is afraid of what might come next. Let's build some tents, he offers, let's stay in this moment as long as possible, because it scares the daylight out of me to think what else could possibly happen up here. Anxiety about what is to come next fills both Elisha and Peter.

Turning points. Where are they in your own life? Where are they in the life of our congregation? Where are they in the church at large? I dare say we sit at the verge of a turning point right now at St. Luke.

Delta Committee has been working with the 845 Design Group of architects and will begin working with ICI Contractors, a design build firm. The goal is to assess our current building with an eye towards future needs. You all entered into that process either through a small group or committee feedback last spring, and again this past November at a Town Hall meeting with the architect. Delta Committee has taken all of that input and feedback, evaluating it against our life here at St. Luke and our dreams for the future.

It was clear early on in the process that St. Luke embodies three ministry areas that reflect who we are and what we value. St. Luke is all about children, mission, and music. We care passionately about the kids of the congregation. We esteem a high level of music in our anthems, hymns, as well as instrumental pieces. Our mission work is all about giving away from our income as well the hands on work of the warming center. Our passions are clear. We stand at a point now in our history, where we ask 'how do we best serve the children of our community? how do we best serve the hungry and the homeless of our community? How do we glorify God with the best music program we can?' The answers to those questions will rest not only in what we do with our building, but in how we go about our work as a congregation in the 21st century.

Will we cling to what we know, as Elisha tried to? Will we be fearful of what comes next, as Peter was? Will we let our own anxieties about the unknown keep us rooted in the past? Or can we follow both Elijah and Jesus as they trust God with their very lives. Their lives were not the same after the stories we heard about today. But within each of those stories lies the paschal mystery of our faith. That is the understanding that new life only comes out of death. Something old must die for something new to be born. We must let go of what we cling to for the new dream God has for us to take shape. God's name is "I AM" not "I WAS" or "I USED TO BE". It takes courage to walk with I AM, for I AM lives in the present moment, not the past. But if we are disciples, that courage is not hard to find. It shines on the mountaintop of the Transfiguration, and hangs on the cross of Calvary. It is found in the emptiness of a tomb.

Our trust in Jesus will allow us to moving into this turning point in our history without fear. Our trust in Jesus will allow us to always ask 'what is best for the folks we have yet to served?' rather than 'what is best for me?' Our trust in Jesus will give us joy and freedom as we answer the call to ministry to children and to mission. Our trust in Jesus allows us to surrender any anxiety we may feel, and instead enter turning points with anticipation and confidence that God leads the way. Anxiety, worry, fret, and fear have no place at all in the congregation that stands at God's turning point. Anxiety, worry, fret and fear will not allow us to become all that God dreams for us.

And so I invite you to enter this next turning point for St. Luke with a few challenges; at every decision point, let's ask 'what is best for those folks who have yet to find St. Luke?'. I challenge us to drop the word 'worry' from any conversation. I challenge us to check our fears, and make a point instead to look into the future with joy and confidence. I challenge us to place our trust in God, not in the past or how we used to do things. Yes, turning points can be challenging places for us. But let's follow Elisha, pick up our new mantle and become prophets for the next generations. Amen.