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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/19/2012, The Transfiguration of Our Lord
2 Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9
Seeing Beyond the Turmoil of this World

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is that wonderful scene called “the translation of Elijah.” The story is told in our First Lesson, from Second Kings. Elisha, the disciple of the great prophet Elijah, gets to witness the ascent of Elijah in the whirlwind:

¹¹And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. ¹²And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. (2 Kings 2:11-12, KJV)

ELISHA

I would like to begin this sermon by telling one of my favorite stories about this awe-struck young man Elisha, from a few chapters later in the book of Second Kings. Elisha is the one who witnessed the translation of Elijah into heaven. To set the stage for this story, I lift up one of the precious teachings of the New Testament. It concerns faith:

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things *not seen*. (Hebrews 11:1, KJV)

And so it is that we walk by faith, not by *sight*. Ahh! But suppose we *could* see! Suppose that in the moment of danger or discouragement, when we seem terribly outnumbered and likely to fall, our eyes were opened to the Everlasting Arms upholding us. Suppose we could see that Champion who fights at our side, even Jesus Christ our Lord, with all his goodness and strength. Then, we would be encouraged.

And I want us to be encouraged! I want little Dylan Sydney Dollman, who is to be baptized after this sermon, to be encouraged. I want her to know all her life long that for a Christian life is better than it looks. Far better!

So, let me tell you this happy little story about Elisha. Once upon a time, the king of Syria was furious about certain military setbacks he had suffered in his warring against Israel. He began to suspect that someone in his inner council was a traitor and was leaking his plans to Israel. “Not so,” said one of the servants. “We have no traitor among us. Rather, the problem is that prophet Elisha. He somehow

knows your plans. And he tells the king of Israel. That's why Israel keeps escaping. The problem is that prophet Elisha."

So, the king of Syria resolves to send his armies to Israel to capture that trouble-maker Elisha. The Syrian king is told that the prophet is in a town called Dothan. I'll let the Bible tell you what happens next:

It was told him, "Behold, he is in Dothan." ¹⁴So he sent there horses and chariots and a great army; and they came by night, and surrounded the city.

¹⁵When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was round about the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶He said, "Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

¹⁷Then Elisha prayed, and said, "O LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. (2 Kings 6:13-17, RSV)

And so it was that he who had witnessed the heavenly chariot of Israel at the translation of his master, Elijah, now has the chariots of fire surrounding himself and his servant. No wonder Elisha is brave!

What a great line Elisha spoke to his servant:

"Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (2 Kings 6:16, RSV)

This is the encouragement I like to imagine Moses and Elijah giving to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. "Jesus," I seem to hear them say, "you are headed for Golgotha. You will be abandoned by your friends and you will suffer a horrifying death. But even as you take your last breath, remember this: those who are with you are more than those who are against you -- no matter whether your opponents be as strong as mountains and as numberless as the stars of the sky. For your Heaven Father and the Holy Spirit are on your side. Yea, and all the saints of all the ages and all the heavenly host are on your side. Therefore, the victory is yours. Your good fight for the salvation of the world shall succeed. Things are far better than they seem."

DEATH IS A HORRIBLE THING

Today's story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord has a soul-stirring prelude: Jesus speaks of his coming death. He tells his disciples beforehand of his looming death:

And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31, KJV)

Peter does not like such downhearted talk, but Peter is going to have to give way here. Jesus does not desire to die, but he knows that he soon will. The only way for Jesus to avoid it is to forsake the salvation of the world, and *that*, he will not do.

We can never pretend that death is okay. It is horrifying and heartbreaking and an offense against our Maker, who did not intend for us to die, but to live!

Still, there is more to death than meets the eye. And the thing about the two companions of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration is that they know this. They know it by personal experience. They both know about the end of this earthly life and about glories that enwrap the people of God at life's end.

WHAT A HOLY SOCIETY THEY FORM!

What a holy society they form! Moses and Elijah had both walked in the ways of Jesus. They had been filled with his Spirit. They had both devoted themselves to the people of God, preaching the Word of God, risking death, risking all for the sake of the people entrusted to them. Now, in the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, they meet with Jesus and talk with him. St. Luke tells us the subject of their conversation: they talk of Christ's "departure." That is, they talk with him about his looming death on the cross:

²⁹And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. ³⁰And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹who appeared in glory and spoke of his *departure*, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:29-31, RSV)

It was a subject of which they had personal experience. Both Moses and Elijah lived out their span of life. Then, there came a day when they were no more to be found here upon earth. They departed, to be with the Lord. Their friends and their disciples, then, had to press onwards without them. Life might have been harder and lonelier without Moses and Elijah, but life went on.

But the interesting about Moses and Elijah is that they both had mysterious and unusually peaceful ends to their earthly life. It is as if with them, the veil is drawn back, and we get a glimpse of the divine dimension as death draws near. We look at the patient in the hospital bed. We see the emaciated body and the final struggles for breath. What is harder to see are "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" as the saint is carried in triumph to heaven.

MOSES

Let me speak briefly of these two giants of faith, Moses and Elijah. They are shown in our Transfiguration painting here at Immanuel, far above our reredos. I begin with Moses and the end of his days on this earth. The story is told in such a way as to entwine two notes about Moses as he approached death. First, his death had a feel of being mid-stream, as if there was no obvious reason why Moses should die at that time. His health and energy were good. It is emphasized in the story:

⁷And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. (Deuteronomy 34:7, KJV)

The second note about the death of Moses is that with him it is clear what is also true for those who die in Christ, only we do not always see it: that is, Moses was not simply laid low by sin, death, and the devil, as if whisked off the table of earth like some no account crumb. Rather, Moses was tended to by God in his final moments:

⁵So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. ⁶And he [the LORD!] buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. (Deuteronomy 34:4-6, KJV)

And so it is that in his final hours on earth, Moses had a pastor. He had someone to talk with and to take charge of him. Indeed, he was ministered to by the LORD himself. The LORD even buried him, most tenderly I do believe.

ELIJAH

Now, let's take a look at Elijah. It is a story from ancient times in Israel, from back in the days before the great written prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah.

There is a sense of wonder and grandeur about this story. Carol and I wore out our brains some trying to come up with a modern parallel to it. Here are the chief factors: First off, a great man, Elijah, is dying. He had dedicated his life to turning things around in his land. The man had fought moral and spiritual giants. Elijah had worked to overthrow the royal house of Ahab and Jezebel and to return the people of Israel from their Baal worship to worship of the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So, Elijah is a great man and is dying. But the second factor about the story is that Elijah is dying in such a way that everyone in sight knows about it and cares about. Wherever Elijah and his disciple Elisha go, groups of prophets whisper to

Elisha that his master is soon to depart. But Elisha already knows this. He simple tells the prophets to hold their tongue, and he journeys onward with his master.

The best modern comparison Carol and I could come up with was the approaching death of Pope John Paul II. All the world seemed to wait with sorrow and expectation for the news of his death. We knew he was dying. We knew that he had helped transform the world. We knew that we had been witness to a great man of faith. He died, yes, but he died with the knowledge and affection of many people.

So it is with Elijah. His end is near. People know it. And they seem to understand that their generation has been blessed to be in the presence of a great man.

Now, here is the interesting thing about the death of Elijah: It is like that of Moses in that he does not seem to be ill; he seems to be master of the situation as always. They reach the Jordan River, for example, but it is no obstacle for him. He calmly rolls up his mantel, strikes the water and parts it, so that they can cross over dryshod. The end of his earthly days is also like that of Moses in how peaceful it seems. The LORD is well in charge of this passing. And my! What a passing that must have been:

¹¹And as they still went on and talked, behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. (2 Kings 2:11, RSV)

So, these two spiritual giants of Israel - Moses and Elijah - meet with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and talk with him of his departure. What the disciples, err long, will see will be horrifying. What Jesus himself will see will be horrifying not only to his eyes but within his body as he is crucified. But in the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, Moses and Elijah are encouraging Jesus for the road ahead by reminding him of heaven's involvement with his death. Jesus will follow on in his way of the Cross, and he will die. But Moses and Elijah know that there is more to death than meets the eye: there is also heaven and he who is Lord of all, even the Triune God.

WE SEE THE HOSPITAL APPARATUS

When we go to the hospital, we see the hospital apparatus, we see the frail body and the shallow breathing. With the eyes of faith try also to see "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" Try to see the white and radiant robes of Jesus, shining like the sun. Remember the Communion of Saints and all those good folks who have gone before.

Jesus goes on to the cross, but he goes strengthened by his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. Indeed, Jesus walks on toward that cross with the confidence that St. Paul will later put into word:

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (1
Corinthians 15:55, KJV)

O GRAVE, WHERE IS THY VICTORY?

Death will *never* have victory over us. Nor will death's lieutenants: illness, poverty, loneliness, heartaches. Never let fear of death, or any of the devil's assaults, drive us away from the path of love, for this death is no death, but victory through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.