

**Blacksburg Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. William Love**  
**Sunday, February 22, 2009**

**MY SON, THE BELOVED**

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

There is a story about Michelangelo. He had just begun work on a new sculpture. He took his hammer and chisel in hand and began to work on a large piece of marble.

A little boy stood watching him. He had never seen a sculptor work before and knew nothing about what he was seeing. All he saw was pieces of stone fly and fall away from the large block of marble. He had no idea what was going on.

A few weeks later the little boy returned to the Michelangelo's studio. The large block of marble was no longer there. Sitting there instead was a large, powerful lion. The little boy was surprised. He ran over to the sculptor and asked with great excitement, *Sir, tell me, how did you know there was a lion in the marble?* [Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 87, citing Mora, *Existential Metaphysics*] *How did you know there was a lion in the marble?*

Henri Nouwen, the Catholic priest who related this story, says that *the art of sculpture is, first of all, the art of seeing.* [Nouwen, 87]

Michelangelo saw, in one block of marble, David with his sling as he readied to hurl a stone at the head of Goliath. In another block of marble, he saw a loving, grieving Mary as she held her dead son Jesus on her lap.

The *Vulgate*, the Latin translation of the Bible, mistranslated the verb *shine* in describing Moses' face when he came down from Mt. Sinai as meaning *with horns*. So, in another block of marble, Michelangelo saw a horned Moses.

\* \* \*

Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John with him to a mountaintop to pray. As Jesus was praying on the mountain, his appearance was altered. His clothes became dazzling white.

Moses (who was the giver of God's law) and Elijah (the greatest of the prophets) stood with him.

\* \* \*

In 2nd Kings, we read of Elijah and his departure. (The gospel of Luke says that Moses and Elijah spoke of Jesus' departure, which in the Greek is the same word as **exodus**, and, indeed, the story of Moses, this passage about Elijah, and the work of Jesus bring to mind the Exodus and its purpose.)

It is time for Elijah to end his prophetic ministry and to pass the mantle on to Elisha.

Elijah leads Elisha on a journey through the Land of Promise. First to Bethel, one of the sacred temple sites in Israel, then to Jericho, the site of the first victory as the people entered the Promised Land, then through the Jordan River, where the people had crossed into the Land of Promise. Each of these places was a place, where in their history, the people knew God had worked and faithfully kept his word to his people. It would make sense to expect God to work in one of these places.

Elijah was the prophet through whom God had spoken. Now God was bypassing those familiar places and the prophet would no longer be there to speak.

If the people were to expect God to work only where God had worked before and to speak only how God had spoken before, then they would have missed the new places, the new ways, the new leaders through whom God would work. Moses would be followed by Joshua;

## MY SON, THE BELOVED — 2

Elijah by Elisha; until finally the Christ would come to show us a light that would shine through any and all darkness.

\* \* \*

The disciples came with Jesus and had the profound experience of that light. The exact nature of this intense religious experience on the mountain, which we call by the name *transfiguration*, is uncertain.

The gospel of Matthew uses the word *vision*. [Mt. 17:9]

The poet John Milton, when he was a youth, was in a class that was asked to write a poem about Jesus' changing the water into wine. In the hour, he wrote fewer words than his classmates. He produced only one line: *The conscious water knew its Lord and blushed*. One simple line that conveys a moment when we realize the moment is sacred.

The Transfiguration was such a moment. It is an epiphany where we can see through a door in time into eternity.

It was a mystical experience, some direct kind of encounter with God. And like Moses, Jesus shone.

And a cloud came and overshadowed them. And a voice came out of the cloud and said, *This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him!*

In this encounter with God, Jesus' appearance changed. Peter, James, and John were eventually able to see the difference. And the difference is connected with what Jesus will accomplish in Jerusalem.

What Jesus will make the journey to Jerusalem for is the crucifixion and resurrection. His appearance on the mountain anticipates his appearance at Easter. The Jesus we see here is the Jesus we will see in the resurrection.

They could not remain on the mountain. Jesus had to get on to Jerusalem.

\* \* \*

It was difficult to see for the people Moses came to from the mountain. After the way they had behaved in the wilderness, it is not too difficult to understand why they would be afraid of someone who had had an encounter with God and whose face showed visible evidence that meeting God had made a difference.

It was difficult for those faced the mystery of Elijah's departure, yet the mystery was unveiled for them to see.

It was difficult for Peter and the others to see what was before them and what it meant. Their senses were dulled by sleep. They had to wake to see Christ's glory at all.

Someone once said, *There is as much of heaven visible as we have eyes to see*. [William Winter] God does not hide from us. God shows the divine nature, who God is, to us. It often seems like a mystery to us, but it is an open mystery. It is there for us to see, as much as we have eyes to see.

Like the people of Israel who looked at Moses, we use veils to obscure our view.

Those veils may be conflicting loyalties [like family, country, business interests, the need to make a living — certainly God knows we have these other obligations to meet and would not ask us to chose any other way — or reality (I know what I ought to do but it is not very realistic; what happens if...) or noble principles (the Pharisees would have let an animal die in a ditch rather than pull it out on the Sabbath; principles can prevent us from seeing where God is working and where our help is needed; they can lead us to think we are above all that, even though Christ would have made no such claim).

Like the disciples who went up to the mountain with Jesus, our eyes are heavy, our senses numbed, as if we were asleep.

Our spiritual senses can be numbed by excuses (we find so many reasons, good ones, too, not to look directly at what God wants of us and we settle for less than God) and by fears (we see so clearly the danger, or even the discomfort, of following God, and they seem so real, that we are paralyzed with fear).

We may even wonder if anyone meets God so the affects are visible just by looking at them.

One wonders what God saw in the people of Israel or the disciples or us that made God willing to give Christ up to have us as God's own. When we are hard of head and hard of heart like marble, we might even wonder what God's hammer and chisel might fashion of us.

\* \* \*

And that brings us back around to the little boy's question: *How did you know there was a lion in the marble?*

Michelangelo had two tasks. One was to see the lion in the marble. The other was to make it visible for others to see. Michelangelo freed the lion from the bondage of the marble where it had been hidden from the beginning of time.

The answer to the boy's question is: *I knew there was a lion in the marble because before I saw the lion in the marble I saw him in my own heart. The secret is that it was the lion in my heart who recognized the lion in the marble.* [Nouwen, 103]

God saw us as people to have as his own in Christ Jesus. The suffering Christ suffered was human suffering and, in Christ, God felt it. The need humans experience God felt in Christ.

And in the crucifixion and resurrection, God begins to work in us that we will take on the likeness of Christ.

And we are able to see the likeness of Christ in others.

We can see it in two places. We see it in those who are being changed into Christ's likeness — those, like us, whom Christ called friends. And we can see it in those in need — those Christ called the least of his brothers and sisters, those toward whom Christ acted as a friend.

The Christ in us is able to recognize the Christ in them. Just as the sculptor, it not enough just to see and just to recognize either a lion in marble or Christ in ourselves or others. We need to take action to make Christ visible: by the way we live our lives in our homes and in our church and in our business and in our nation and in our world.

It is not enough to say we love God, we need to show it. It is not enough to say God sets people free from bondage. We need to show it — from the troubled human spirit to the troubled human society.

\* \* \*

I played a lot of different sports when I was growing up, but baseball was my passion. And I was pretty good. In the years since I played baseball, I have told stories about games I played and plays in those games. And it occurred to me one day as I was telling one of those stories that, the longer I don't play, the better I used to be.

Such are memories of the past.

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church has a past as well. In that past is a rich history of God's presence in this place and God's power in these people.

We could recall that past and wish to return to it or hold on to it, fearing change that would take it away.

That would be expecting God to work only in the places God had worked before and only in the same ways without leaving ourselves vulnerable to new ways of God's working, as Moses gave way to Joshua, Elijah gave way to Elisha, and all gave way to Jesus, and the holy places

gave way to Golgotha and an empty tomb.

That would produce what one preacher called *the protective strategy of deliberate failure; you can't lose any money if you don't place any bets; you can't fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor.* [Coffin, *The Courage to Love*, 60-61]

Paul says that our gospel is veiled only to those who are perishing but our God has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ; therefore, by the mercy of God, we remove the veils that obscure our view of God. By the mercy of God, our senses are alert (not numbed by spiritual sleepiness).

By the mercy of God, we wake and see (we recognize in ourselves and in others the risen Christ: by the way we live, we make visible the risen Christ in our world.

We wake and we see glory of Christ. For we all are being changed into Christ's likeness from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord.

In a Transfiguration, we see through the stone of our lives into the sacred heart of life itself; we see through a door in the universe to see eternity and have eternity touch our lives.