

Date: February 26, 2006

**SUNDAY:** Transfiguration

**SERMON: The Legacy of Christ**

Text(s): 2 Kings 2:1-15; Mark 9:2-9

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When I say the word “legacy,” the first thing that pops into your mind might say something about where you are in life’s journey. If you’re a high school student, applying to a college that one of your parents or your grandparents attended, or if you’re an admissions officer in a college, you might think of being admitted as a “legacy” applicant.

If you’re close to retirement, you might be thinking of the professional legacy you’ll leave behind. Will there be some significant accomplishments that you’ve been able to contribute during your active career? Or when you reach the age when you have to begin your estate planning and making out your will, you may be thinking of the material or financial legacy that you’ll pass on to your children. (Your children are probably thinking about that too!) Or you may also be concerned with what sort of spiritual legacy you will leave behind? What values, what moral character, what inspiring memories will you pass on to the next generation?

We hear the term legacy at about this point in every second-term presidential administration. Presidents become concerned, or at least the news media does, if not the presidents themselves, about their legacy—the political or legislative policies that they hope will be lasting and remembered in a positive light.

At about the same time in mid-life that we begin to think about the legacy we will leave behind, we become more aware of what has been passed on to us by those who have gone before us that have shaped us or helped us become the persons we are now.

About fifteen years ago, when we were back in western Pennsylvania visiting my parents, my two brothers and their families were there

also from Michigan, and my grandfather on the Kalajainen side was there too along with assorted uncles, aunts, and cousins. Pap, as we called him, was nearly 90 at that point, and our only living grandparent. He was still of sound mind and fairly sound body as well. Like most Finlanders, Pap was the strong, silent type; he always really enjoyed family gatherings, but he didn’t say much. You have to be at least part Finnish, I think, to understand how you can have a party where everyone is enjoying themselves but things are very quiet because no one’s talking much. My mother’s family who were Irish contributed most of the noise.

But, that evening, sitting around on the back porch, we learned a part of our family’s legacy we’d never known before. My youngest brother had asked our grandfather to tell us something about our family history in the early years after his parents had emigrated from Finland to America. He began telling us about his younger sister Sophie, our great-aunt, whom we’d never even known had existed. Sophie had been involved in some labor-organizing activities back in the 20’s and had been killed by strike-breakers during a strike at a steel mill in our hometown. Even my father had never heard this story, though he knew that one of his father’s sisters had died young. And it suddenly struck my brothers and I that there was probably a lot more family history tucked away in Pap’s head that we wanted to find out before he was gone. We sensed there was something important there for our own sense of who we were and are as a family.

On this Feast of the Transfiguration of Christ, our lessons both raise this matter of legacies. In our Old Testament lesson, we have the story of how the younger prophet Elisha inherits the legacy of the older prophet Elijah. For the next three weeks, we’re going to concentrate on the stories about Elijah to help us get ready for the choir’s performance of Mendelssohn’s oratorio *Elijah* on March 19, so it’s fortuitous that the text for this Transfiguration Sunday is the story of Elijah

passing on the mantle of his office to his younger colleague Elisha. We're starting at the end of the story, as it were, and then, over the next several weeks, we'll go back and pick up the earlier parts of the story of Elijah.

Both Elijah, the old prophet and his younger protege Elisha were concerned about who would inherit the prophetic office when Elijah was gone. Elijah had fought many hard battles for the truth and for God's honor as he saw it. He had resisted the wickedness of King Ahab, even at serious risk to his life; he had fought long and valiantly, if not always wisely, to prevent the Israelites from losing their distinctive belief in one God and being absorbed into the polytheism of their neighbors the Canaanites. What would become of the people when their spiritual leader and moral conscience was no longer with them.

Elisha lived with Elijah in his later years, traveling with him, caring for him in his old age, learning from him. Yet Elijah wanted to know if Elisha had what it would take to be the leader of the prophets of Israel? Did he have the courage to confront rulers and kings in the name of God and speak the truth to power? Did he have the "right stuff?"

Our story shows us the lengths to which Elijah went to test Elisha's mettle. He keeps suggesting other activities that Elisha might find more pressing or attractive than hanging around with him. But no suggestion that Elisha go off and look to his own interests was accepted. Elisha proved his fitness by insisting on accompanying Elijah right to the end, even when he knew that Elijah would be taken away from him. He didn't flinch from what he might guess was going to be an awesome and terrible experience. And it was; a whirlwind with the appearance of a fiery chariot pulled by fiery horses, sweeps down upon them, and Elijah is carried away.

Some kids at summer church camp made

up a song about this story. I don't know if the kids at Pilgrim Lodge sing that song, but I remember the first two lines went like this:

The prophet Elijah was a good  
old man,  
God took him to heaven in a fiery  
sedan.

Somehow, I rather think that vision of the chariot of fire and the blazing glory of God were probably a good deal more intimidating than our story makes out. There was a reason why all the other prophets hung back on the far side of the river and didn't go across with Elijah and Elisha. It's one thing to do God's work; it's quite another to get "up close and personal" with God like Elijah and Elisha did. After Elijah and the fiery chariot have disappeared, Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle which he has left behind, and goes back across the river to where the other prophets are waiting for him, and who recognize that he now has the spirit of Elijah in him.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, three very unlikely candidates for sainthood, Peter, James, and John, had an "up close and personal" encounter with the glory of God as well, and from Mark's description, it too was fairly intimidating. Peter babbles out something; he seems always to have the need to comment on everything, but he doesn't make any sense. Mark says he really didn't know what to say. Well, who would? Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus in a bright aura of heavenly glory. The presence of Moses and Elijah are meant to convey the message that both the Law (or Torah) and the Prophets of the Old Testament witness to Jesus as the divinely anointed Son of God, the one who has inherited the legacy of both Moses and Elijah and brings that legacy to fulfillment. The heavenly voice heard by the disciples confirms this.

But there's something else going on here too. This brief glimpse of the glorified Jesus doesn't last long. The bright aura— the radiant

cloud that surrounds them— disappears, and the disciples are once more alone on the mountain, “with Jesus only,” Mark tells us. And they don't understand what's happened. That becomes clear from their conversation on the way down the mountain. Yet these confused men are the ones who receive the legacy that Jesus himself leaves behind. In fact, as they will only slowly discover following Jesus' crucifixion, they themselves *are* that legacy.

And that's precisely what Mark is trying to say to the Christians for whom he wrote his gospel forty years or so later. One prominent biblical scholar has called Mark's Gospel, "a form for absence." By that, he means that it was written for people who didn't have Jesus around to walk with them and consult with them and teach them as the first disciples had. They did, however, have a legacy that Jesus had left them, and all subsequent generations of disciples. The gospel itself gave them a new way to experience the presence of Jesus; in reading and hearing and telling the stories about him that Mark wrote for them whenever they got together, they discovered Jesus alive among them and present with them again. They discovered that they themselves were Jesus' legacy.

The Gospels do the same thing for all those subsequent generations of Christians, including us. They help us to experience the presence of Jesus in a different, though very real sense. He is absent in that he no longer walks the roads of Galilee preaching the Kingdom of God and demonstrating its presence in his own person. But he is present in our fellowship, and that presence is evoked whenever we get together and listen again to the stories about Jesus contained in the Gospels. If it were not for the power of the stories in the Gospels to mediate the presence of the Risen Jesus to us, there would be little, if any value, in reading or telling them at all. Certainly those earliest disciples believed that when they got together with each other and told and listened to the Gospel stories, Jesus was with them. They

discovered they had his authority and power to go out and change the world. Where did it come from? From Jesus, the Risen One, who was now glorified, as they had envisioned him on the holy Mountain, and who had left the legacy of his Spirit with them. Where they went, Christ went too. They carried him in their hearts, on their lips, in their acts of love, in their worship and fellowship.

And they, too, have passed on the legacy to us. Where we the community of Christians are, Christ is too. We not only have received Christ's legacy; we *are* that legacy.

Elisha didn't stick around hoping that Elijah would reappear in the fiery chariot that took him away; he accepted the prophet's mantle and immediately went to work. The disciples didn't hang around, making repeated pilgrimages to the Mount of Transfiguration, hoping for another experience of glory. They picked themselves up from the apparent disaster of Jesus' crucifixion and went to work, confident that Jesus was still at work in them and through them. They went out and preached the good news of the resurrection, they cared for the sick in Jesus' name, they visited prisoners, proclaimed the truth before rulers and kings, and when things got tough, they freely shouldered their own crosses, and some of them even sang as they went to their deaths. The mantle had been passed on and they knew it and so did the world before long.

So if we are the heirs of Christ, then we probably ought not to spend too much time looking back to some “mountaintop” spiritual experience where we caught a glimpse of glory. We live in a broken and hurting world. People around us are literally dying for lack of hope. The violence in Iraq is only a more intense and localized expression of the violence that rages all over the world, destroying human souls and terrorizing the human spirit. Children are dying every day in the South Bronx or in Darfur or Zambia at a faster rate than they are dying in Iraq.

There is as much hopelessness in some of the trailers and cabins in the blighted areas of Maine as there is in the homes of the West Bank or of Baghdad. Even in the comfortable suburban deserts of middle-class America, there is a lot of despair, a dearth of meaning— an emptiness that not all the consumer goods in the world can fill.

Here and there, however, there are ordinary people or groups of people who seem to know that they have received a legacy that enables them to make a real difference in their little corner of the world. They've had a transfiguring experience that has changed their perception of their lives and their world, and they're working away at bringing hope where there is little hope.

I remember a group of volunteers from our congregation in New Brunswick, NJ, young people and elderly alike, who every Tuesday afternoon, trekked down to the public elementary school that sat right across the street from the high-rise, low-income public housing projects and spent two hours tutoring the children of that school in math, reading, and science. Most people in the city wouldn't go near those projects—even the police wouldn't go there after dark unless they went in force. But every Tuesday afternoon, you could see white-haired grandparents and fresh-faced young mom's and dad's sitting there patiently helping a child from those projects get a leg up in their education. They knew they had received a legacy, and they had accepted the responsibility for passing it on.

We are the ones to whom the legacy of Christ has been left, and through whom Jesus will continue to leave his legacy of hope, in Baghdad and in Millinocket, in corporate boardrooms and in urban classrooms or rural cabins. If the world doesn't see Jesus glorified and risen in us, it will not see him atop some mountain. The legacy of hope which we have received has been left to us in order that we might leave it to others. The mantle has been passed. It's time to go to work.