

II Kings 2:1-12
Mark 9:2-9

word count 1,814

Some of you who have lived in Southern California for a while may remember the story of Larry Walters, a 33-year-old truck driver who, in 1982, decided that he wanted to embrace the world from a new perspective.

For as long as he could remember he had wanted to fly but he had never had the time, the money or the opportunity to be a pilot. Hang gliding was out because there was no good place for gliding near his home. So he spent a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his backyard in his ordinary old aluminum chair; the kind with the webbing and the rivets that you can pick up almost anywhere.

Well, one morning, he went down to the local army surplus store and bought 45 used weather balloons. That afternoon in his girlfriend's back yard in San Pedro, he strapped himself into his lawn chair, to which several of his friends tied the filled helium balloons. He took along a six-pack of Miller Lite, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land.

Walters assumed the balloons would lift him about 30 feet in the air, but he miscalculated. The chair shot up more than 16,000 feet into the sky and into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport. Pilots from both TWA and Delta Airlines spotted Walters, and reported to air traffic control that they had passed a scared looking man in a lawn chair with a gun. Too frightened and cold to shoot any of the balloons, he stayed airborne for more than fourteen hours forcing the airport to shut down its runways and causing long delays in flights from across the country.

According to the New York Times' account, he came down amidst power lines in Long Beach causing a black out.

Soon after he was safely grounded and cited by the police, reporters asked him three questions:

"Were you scared?"

"Yes. Wonderfully so."

"Would you do it again?"

"No."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because," he said, "you can't just sit there."

I think his experience and summary of it, is part of the point of today's scripture lessons: You can't have a mountain top experience if you don't climb the mountain.

Peter, James, and John might answer the same. Were you scared? "Yes...wonderfully so." Going to the mountain top and experiencing a truth one can only grasp from the elevation of higher aspirations must have filled them with a great sense of being, and of knowing that there is even more than they could ever have expected. Elisha, following the greatness that was Elijah, asked of him before he was taken up, a double measure of his spirit—the inheritance due to the one who is in line to carry on, in this case, to hold on through times when kingdoms would split and fortunes rise and fall.

This week's readings raise issues of death, discipleship, struggle, and the experiences that bring us together as a community in dramatic ways. The story in II Kings raises the issue of the upcoming death of the prophet Elijah and Elisha's unwillingness to let him go.

Many of us have gone and are going through this phase of the life cycle with loved ones. We have been unwilling to let them go and tell others to be silent about what is happening, as though silencing them will change the reality. We hope our traveling with our dying beloved, as Elisha does, will slow down the process and give us more time to receive from them what we need before they go.

Many of you have gone through or are going through, life-changing experiences that have caused you to become very close to an understanding of your own sense of mortality, or your place in this world, your personal finances, or even your sense of self. You engage in what may feel like the struggle of your lives. Maybe the struggle isn't over yet, perhaps the end of the tunnel seems a long way off.

As a church, we have struggled to find our faith—what feels authentic and true for us, against what has become the dominant voice speaking for Christianity—legalistic and selectively literal, looking for personal salvation over being good stewards of the earth and servants to each other.

As a country, we are in a struggle just to maintain that we have always come to expect in terms of a strong economy, infrastructure, health care, housing and jobs.

Where is the light ahead? Do you believe it is there, or will you be as surprised as Peter, John and James when it comes upon you?

We know what it is like to be in the valley where the shadows abide. We understand how it is possible to be frozen into inaction—stymied by bad news and feeling so incapable of getting out of a tough situation that we do nothing.

In 1993 I stood talking with my mother across an old oak table in my parents' house on Cape Cod. I don't know why I suddenly needed to say this to her—she looked fine—but I told her she needed to see a doctor. Her face darkened—she said, "I don't want to go to the doctor."

She had cancer, and when I came back months later, she was in a hospital bed in the dining room, and died a couple of weeks later. She was 69. Her oncologist told me that she must have known for a while that something was very wrong, but chose not to pursue a path that might have caught it in time. It is something I have never understood, and it is such a close reminder of what it means to do be struck by a hard challenge and not meet it head on for whatever reasons—fear, fatalism, depression, inaction... I have never judged her for her choice, but I do miss her. It did not have to happen.

Sometimes you just have to climb the mountain if you want to live to have a mountain top experience—to know in your hearts and your minds and in the very nerve endings of your hands and feet that God is still speaking to us, still at work doing something new, right now, right here—before our eyes.

Sometimes you have to climb a mountain so you can see things in a different way, from a little different perspective... as the theologians and the skeptics about mountain top experiences say that the mountain top experience of Jesus was meant to do.

Indeed sometimes you have to climb a mountain to bring things into focus.

And, sometimes you need to climb the mountain to remind yourself that the valleys we find ourselves in do not have to represent the normative ways in which our lives are lived.

You can even have a mountaintop experience through adversity – such as what we are going through together in the aftermath of Prop 8. Something becomes very clear and then we find ourselves in a defining moment and we know who we are and what we must do.

In times such as these, we must believe that a mountain top experience is available to us. I sense something happening right here that suggests that such an experience is poised to happen to us as we expand a community that understands its mission and its reason for being. We find in our new members today a strength and intention to put faith into action that mirrors our own and makes us stronger. A church that knows who it is and why it exists will find the means to become the church God is calling it to be.

The Transfiguration, as found in Mark 9, has varied meanings to us. Some look at this not as an instance of Jesus' divinity but rather as an epoch-making moment of his humanity. This is what our humanity looks like without our defenses. This is the radiant brilliance of the light of the world in us. We are connected to so much more—that which has gone before and that which is to come. But our time is always, now and now, and now again.

At those times in your life when you are vulnerable, troubled, hidden and veiled, whom do you seek and see? Who are your beloveds that surround you? Are any of them in this room? How do they help you to see your own humanity differently?

The prophet Elijah parted the water and walked across with Elisha. He said, “Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Give me a double measure of your spirit.”

We have been given a double measure of a great spirit. You have been imbued with it—it is palpable; it is part of the feeling I get in this place. A minority, a faithful remnant of Beatitude Christians not afraid to state what is unpopular while living amongst the Rapture Raptors. (Proof at last that dinosaurs lived alongside of humankind...)

Elie Wiesel tells the story of a prophet who came to a city and delivered his message every day in the marketplace. After a time his ranting became a fixture of the city’s life and people regarded him with amusement when they regarded him at all. Finally, a small boy, pitying the old man, approached him and said, “Sir, why do you keep crying aloud like this every day, year after year? The people here will never listen to you.”

“I gave up hope that they would listen to me a long time ago,” said the prophet. “I go on crying lest I begin to listen to them.”

In the story of the journey to Jerusalem the disciples are given a genuine moment, a transparent happening that reveals with clarity that Jesus above all people can lay out a message that most closely resembles what it means to be a part of the realm of God. It is this glimpse that will sustain their discipleship into the future. They will continue to cry out in a world not eager to listen.

It is yours to cry out. It is yours, and it is the gift of the kind of faith we try to nurture here, and witnessed to in the radiance of the mountaintop experience of Peter, John and James, and in the light of a mountain top experience right here. Is what we are embarking upon scary? Yes. Wonderfully so.

Let this big, open, loving, caring, *thinking* faith lift you up. As a truck driver named Larry Walters said after being lifted up two miles in the air in an aluminum lawn chair, “Well, you just can’t sit there.”

Peace to you and yours. Amen.

Sermon Resources: I was aided by “Out In Scripture” and Richard Fairchild, on Transfiguration B

Scripture for Sunday, February 22, 2009
Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 2:1-12

1 Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. **2** Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. **3** The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." **4** Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. **5** The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." **6** Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. **7** Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. **8** Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. **9** When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." **10** He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." **11** As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. **12** Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Mark 9:2-9

2 Six days later, 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 clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. **4** And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. **5** Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." **6** He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. **7** Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" **8** Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. **9** As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.