

Please Pay Close Attention

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

A good magician encourages you to pay close attention. You never quite figure out how they manage to do that. A bad magician will use obvious and clumsy distractions that fail to cover the not-so-sneaky slip into a pocket, up the sleeve, into the belt. A good magician has you wanting more. A bad magician is one that you simply want to go away and stop wasting your time. There is little space between good and bad; either you're good or you're not.

We try to pay close attention when we're driving, but we've all had the experience of leaving home, driving somewhere, and, upon arrival, forgetting major portions of the journey. We're left realizing that we were on autopilot. It's rather disturbing that we were rather unconscious the whole time. Or maybe the route was so familiar that our mind couldn't be bothered recording any part of it since we'd recorded it in our memory so many times before.

I think more of our daily lives and experiences fall into that autopilot mode than we realize. We can't remember what we had for dinner three nights ago; it was nothing special, and we could *probably* recall it, but only with some effort. Yet the dinner you had at a restaurant two years ago seems like a fresher memory.

As we've gone through scripture during the sermons, we frequently find things that we weren't expecting, that we hadn't noticed, that we had not understood in proper context. The familiarity of the text can put us in autopilot mode as we read it over one more time.

When scripture relays the presence of God, it's usually done in a way that's unmistakable. The question is whether we become witnesses to a big show, or whether we get the message that is being sent to us as contemporary people of faith. Let's see what happens.

In the story about Elijah and Elisha, the very first clause in the first verse tells the whole story in a nutshell: *When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind....* There is no drama here, it would seem.

A pattern of resistance follows; Elijah tells Elisha to stay put, the Lord has sent him somewhere else, then Elisha declares that he won't abandon Elijah, and they go together. At each destination, "the company of the prophets" steps up to Elisha to say, *Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?* Elisha replies, *Yes, I know, but do not speak of it.* This entire sequence happens three times.

First stop is Bethel. Then it's on to Jericho. Then it's on to the Jordan River. Given the highly stylized sequence of these events, repeated quite precisely three times, there is something going on. The locations have nothing in common and reveal no pattern. The "company of the prophets" at each location is a mystery about whom we

can only speculate. Scholars have no good explanation for this “victory” lap preceding the big event. Everyone seems to know it’s coming, including the company of the prophets, and Elisha, and we learn Elijah knows, too. If everyone knows, then why this whole charade? Why does Elisha tell the “company of the prophets” in each location *do not speak of it*, about what will be happening to Elijah.

The best possibility from scholars is that these were key locations, representative points of importance to the monarchs with whom Elijah was continually in conflict. It makes this a kind of ‘final tour’ from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho that then takes them to the Jordan River.

Here before the Jordan, Elijah rolls his mantle as if it was a staff and strikes the river so that they can cross. This is a reverse replication of Joshua’s crossing the Jordan ending the Exodus by entering the Promised Land; here Elijah and Elisha are leaving the Promised Land to enter the wilderness.

By going ‘beyond the Jordan,’ Elijah and Elisha are effectively outside the reach of any king or worldly ruler. This where Jesus went according to the synoptic gospels following his baptism and before beginning his ministry. This land “beyond the Jordan” could be considered ‘God’s country,’ pure, wild, and ultimately sacred space, unfettered by worldly distractions and where the person is in the presence of God alone.

It seems that the prophets who they encountered along the way have come along for the journey as well, having swelled to 50 of them who stand at a distance on one side of the Jordan River as Elijah and Elisha cross over into the wilderness together.

Here the drama reaches its height. (Okay, it’s a bit anti-climactic since everyone seems to know what will happen.)

Elijah asks his young protégé, *What can I do for you before I am taken from you?* Boldly, Elisha asks, *Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.* The expression a “double portion” does not mean double the spirituality of Elijah; that would be quite outrageous. Think about the faith experiences of Elijah and how his spirituality grew together with his relationship to God. Rather Elisha uses an idiom referring to the preferential allotment of an inheritance. However, this desire for the preferential share may indicate that Elisha knows what Elijah has gone through in his life and seeks as his successor to have every asset he can get at his disposal. Elijah suggests that he has asked for something beyond Elijah’s own ability. God will decide with Elisha just as God decided for Elijah what his lot would be in his path as prophet. Still, Elijah makes the promise that if Elisha sees Elijah being taken up, then he will receive it.

Later, as they walked together, there is sudden event. A chariot of fire and horses of fire separate them and Elijah is swept up in an ensuing whirlwind. Unlike many depictions, Elijah doesn’t hop onto a real chariot and ride to heaven; more like a blinding flash was followed by a burst of wind that swept Elijah away in a split second. Elisha cries out and then rends his clothing in despair at the loss of his master.

We don't get any indication of whether he fulfilled expectations set out Elijah. Elisha's story as the leading prophet serving God will speak for itself. We may only see the fiery chariot and horses. We may only remember Elijah swept up in a whirlwind as if transported on an express run to heaven. In fact, the story is about Elisha, about Elisha's faithful devotion and implicit deep respect for the master, Elijah. Elisha had to prove himself by persisting over Elijah's rejection and attempts to sideline him, dismissing the eager voices in the company of prophets who were ready to be congratulatory when it wasn't time, chastising them not to speak of such things while the master was at hand, and beholding the rather terrifying presence of God that burst upon him.

Elisha met and overcame the obstacles on his road to leadership, acting as a humble servant with an unwavering faith commitment to his master and to his God. He would not be Elijah; there would only be one. However, he would be Elisha, leader among the prophets and faithful servant of God. Elisha's image was transformed.

Elijah appears again with Moses in the story of Jesus' transfiguration before disciples Peter, James, and John on a high mountain. It's a moment that follows Jesus' question of 'who do people say that I am, who do you say that I am.' Peter answers to affirm that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah from God. But then as Jesus explains how he must be killed and will rise again. Peter denies it, getting rebuked by Jesus: *Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.* Yes, there are amazing things happening in this endeavor, but there is also a lack of clarity in the disciples' minds about what Jesus is all about *and* what they're doing.

Then Jesus calls a crowd together with his disciples and lays it out for them: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.* Now that's a serious commitment! Jesus isn't playing around any longer. Not only has he started talking about his own death and resurrection, now he's teaching that following him could lead to their death as well. This whole thing is now in a different light and there urgently needs to be some clarity brought to all of this.

Six days later, they're at an unspecified mountaintop, Jesus, Peter, James, and John. Jesus is "transfigured," a word that is rather unique. It would seem that Jesus takes a new form, having been joined by the spiritual giants Moses and Elijah, and they converse, although we don't know what they say to each other.

Disoriented by the whole experience, Peter tries to step up and suggest building shelters for all three – Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It's a silly thing to say. Keeping silent – awestruck – may have been preferable, but Peter opens his mouth and steps in it. Peter is ignored as: *A cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"*

It's short and to the point. God has made clear to them now exactly who Jesus is and how they should regard his words. And then it's over.

It is when they are coming down from the mountain that Jesus tells them not to tell anyone, to keep silent about this. As in other places where Jesus will instruct those around him to tell no one, it seems curious. Isn't this what people should know? Isn't this amazing display of an explanation and affirmation of everything Jesus is about? Isn't **this** what's important?

Apparently not. Jesus' reason for saying this has to be surmised. It would seem that these displays are **not** what Jesus wants people to focus on. This big, splashy display is **not** what constitutes his ministry. The gospel of good news, of love, justice, grace, and peace is what needs to be paid close attention, not the miraculous and magnificent.

The transfiguration was really a private event for key disciples, intended as a clear message to them about Jesus and his role in serving the will of his heavenly Father. However, this really was **not** something meaningful and important in the overall scope of Jesus' ministry. It is explanatory at best, and for those outside the inner circle, a distraction from the real work of ministry, of healing, challenging demons, bringing hope and new life in the name of a loving God.

Furthermore, Jesus and the disciples can't stay on the mountaintop. Ministry is not going to be done on the mountaintop. 'Keep silent, tell no one, and focus on the real work of the Kingdom.'

Paying close attention actually helps us to listen, to sift through the blazing fireworks, the smoke and mirrors, the bright, shiny baubles that seem so persistently attractive, and focus on what's really important, what's real ministry advancing the Kingdom.

On Wednesday, we come before the Lord in repentance on Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent begins. It is the season for paying close attention, for focusing on what's important, setting aside distractions, seeking new paths and new learning. Even the solemnness of an Ash Wednesday ritual is not what's important. The purifying and strengthening of the spirit to meet the challenges in ministry is what's important, because that's what's needed in advancing the Kingdom. May we please pay close attention ... to understand what's important.