

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on February 11, 2024.**

EMBODIED

<2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; Mark 9:2-9>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

The picture on the front cover of the hiking guide for Shenandoah National Park is a sweeping panorama view of the Shenandoah Valley, looking west from Hawksbill Peak. Hawksbill is the highest peak in the park, higher even than its more renowned sister, Old Rag. The views from the Hawksbill summit allow you to see into West Virginia; the use of a picture of such a view is meant to inspire each and every visitor to the park to exuberantly hike these trails and claim these sights for yourself. Which is exactly what my friends and I did when we were visiting Shenandoah in the summer of 2011.

Much like Peter, James and John, we ascended the mountain trail, climbing gradually upward through the trees with the sounds of nature around us. We plodded upward, motivated by the view that must surely await us at the summit. While not deliberate, we were mirroring the steps of the three disciples as they made their way to the top of Mt. Tabor with Jesus. But there was another, unexpected commonality that my friends and I shared with the disciples.

I don't know if you've had much experience yourself with Shenandoah National Park or the surrounding Appalachian region of Virginia, but it's known for its fog and misty conditions. By the time we had reached the summit of Hawksbill Peak and arrived at the viewing platform - which should have allowed us a generous 360-degree view of the surrounding countryside, the fog of the morning had fully settled in and we could see...nothing. Visibility was about 50 yards. It was a good hike, but save the act of going out for a hike in the first place, it offered us nothing in return. Whatever our expectations might have been, they were left unmet.

I don't know what expectations the three disciples might have had for that day, ascending Mt. Tabor with their Rabbi, the one whom they had recently proclaimed and realized to be the Messiah. But I would hazard a guess that no matter what they did expect, it was not what actually happened.

Similar to Hawksbill Peak, Mt. Tabor is a peak which provides 360-degree views of the surrounding region. From the top of it, on a clear day, a person may glimpse Mt. Carmel, on which Elijah had his infamous showdown with the prophets of Baal, as well as Mt. Hermon, which would have marked the northern boundary of Israel and was considered to potentially be a place of covenant itself. As the disciples reached the summit, they would have been able to see these sights, representing not only the physical landscape of their world but the spiritual landscape, as well. That is, until the unexpected happened, and they found themselves in a cloud which obscured all vision, forcing them to focus their attention on what was happening right in their midst.

And even more to their amazement, in the midst of this cloud appeared Moses and Elijah, Jesus was transfigured before their eyes, and the voice of God echoed what was said at Jesus' baptism: that Jesus is indeed God's Son.

It cannot be overstated how impactful such an encounter would be. Peter, James and John are now not only in the presence of their rabbi, whom they have proclaimed to be the Messiah, but now they are also in the presence of two of their heroes in the faith, who represent the ways in which God has been present among the people in times past. Furthermore, they are joined by the Divine voice, affirming their proclamation and exhorting them to listen, and in so listening, to continue to journey with and live as instructed. It is no wonder that Peter, for lack of knowing anything else to do or say, offers to build three huts for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, that they may all dwell there.

Several decades ago, after RV campers had truly made their entrance into the American landscape, a critic made the observation of what they offered. In short, his view is that people “buy a motor home with the hope of seeing new places...yet deck it out with the same furnishings as a living room. Thus nothing really changes. We may drive to a new place, set ourselves in a new surrounding, but the newness goes unnoticed, for we’ve only carried along our old setting.”

Now, this critique is both quite old, and is also very generic. I know people who go RV camping for whom this is not their perspective or approach. But the point is one worth considering: we cannot appreciate what is to come if we are filled with the comforts of what is.

Mark’s gospel proclaims that Peter responds, in part, from terror. “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.” Some of this is likely due to the encounter they are witnessing of Moses and Elijah. But some of their terror could also be from the unknown of what this encounter represents: as the Kingdom of God draws closer, embodied in the person of Jesus whom they have thought they know, they begin to realize that they may not know at all what is to come. In that moment, Peter is filled, still, with the comfort of what has been, the comfort of what was understood, as well as the anxiety-inducing uncertainty of what is to come.

The landscape is now hidden from them, and unfamiliar. The view that they thought they would have from the mountaintop has been obscured, and likewise their spiritual view of what they thought would be realized has been thrown into uncertainty.

Humans like to be able to see where we’re going. Whether this is in regards to the physical world around us or, more abstractly, in regards to our general direction in life, we like to be able to see it in advance. One of the greatest obstacles to overcome in the fire service is training new firefighters to operate effectively in low-to-zero visibility conditions. The inability to see what is coming, what is ahead of us, triggers a warning in our lizard brain, putting us into a defensive posture. This is why the unknown becomes so stressful and anxiety producing. Peter’s response to this is to, almost literally, sit down and not move forward. This is one possible response, but it is misguided in terms of the life of faith. Elisha offers us another example.

The story of Elijah being taken up into heaven at the end of his ministry as a prophet is one which has filled the imagination and has been utilized to provide an example of the results of faithful service in difficult tasks. As such, not as much attention is given to Elisha in the midst of this particular transition.

Three times, Elijah - perhaps knowing what is about to come and desiring to save his protegee any heartache - tries to separate himself from Elisha. First Elijah says he must go on from Gilgal to Bethel. Then from Bethel to Jericho. Then from Jericho to the Jordan. Essentially walking back and forth over the same stretch of the Judean wilderness. And each time, Elisha recommits to staying with Elijah.

Relatedly, each time they approached the current destination, the other prophets of the village came out to Elisha and asked if he knew what was to happen, that Elijah would be taken from him. Elisha does, and his response each time is, essentially, "we're not going to talk about it."

In the face of the unknown future, Elisha chooses not to ignore the reality, nor to dwell on it. Rather, he picks a third option, which is to bear witness. But it is not just to bear witness passively, but to bear witness so that he may then continue the ministry which has begun with Elijah and will pass on to him. When asked what may be done at the time of departure, Elisha asks for "a double portion." In essence, Elisha is asking not only for a meal, but for a second helping so that he may be overfilled for what is to come. Also, in this request that Elisha would be made the heir of Elijah's gifts and ministry. He will continue, not only in what Elijah has accomplished but in more than that, as well. Elisha returns across the Jordan, doubly-filled with the presence of the Spirit of God, in order to lead and prophecy to the people for what is to come next, known or unknown. He now embodies the Spirit of God for the people of God, as they all journey ahead. It does not guarantee to be safe and comfortable, but it will be right where they need to be.

On that morning in Shenandoah, we could see next to nothing; the cloud cover and fog was too thick. On that encounter on the mountain, the disciples could see next to nothing of the distance or the surrounding region, but their eyes were filled to overflowing with the presence of God, the heritage and history of their faith, embodied before them. And when cloud cover was lifted, the embodiment remained in the person of Jesus, leading them into the future of the people, of the Kingdom of God, and of the Church that would come to be. They were led not only to Jerusalem and the cross, but also to the empty tomb and the fullness of resurrected life.

Years later, my wife and I were able to return to Shenandoah and to make that hike again. This time, as we reached the overlook, the sun was shining and the view was unobscured. We could see for miles upon miles, and the vision was clear. Where are we being led? It's somewhat of an unknown in terms of specific logistics, but not in terms of who we are and who we are called to be in faith. As we look to the One who embodies the fullness of the Divine Presence among us here in this earthly reality, and as we approach the season of Lent and all that it holds, we fix our eyes upon the vision of where God is leading us, as well. And in this, we seek to discern a clear vision of the Kingdom of God. Thankfully, we still have in our spirits the Spirit of the One who embodies all of our faith. Amen.