

Elijah Twice

Each Sunday the three Bible readings in a worship service are taken from a schedule of Bible readings laid out for every week of the year. They aren't just arbitrarily picked by me. And this morning, the story about Elijah's entrance into heaven was paired with Jesus' transfiguration. The reason these two stories are put together in one worship service is of course because Elijah makes an appearance in both. He goes up to heaven in one and comes down from heaven in the other. And I initially wanted to preach on this great story in 2 Kings because I think this story is absolutely fascinating! In fact, I started to work with that part of the Bible earlier this week: going through the original Hebrew version like I usually do, writing out a few main points and a couple different directions the sermon could go, developing a theme and a basic outline that would guide the actual writing of the manuscript.... But after all that, I had to stop. I couldn't go any further. I wanted to, but the problem is: this is Transfiguration Sunday – the day on which we commemorate Jesus on the mountain, giving his disciples a brief look at some of his Godly glory.

I thought I could pull it off: I thought that I could expertly tie Elijah's entrance into heaven into the story of Jesus' transfiguration, wowing you with my rhetorical skill of weaving two story lines together on a parallel track. I couldn't do it. I couldn't preach on the impressive story of Elijah into heaven without doing it to the expense of the even more impressive story of Jesus on the mountain. And so the chariot of fire and the heavenly horsemen, the powerful whirlwind and the big build up, Elisha's heartbreak and Elijah's unprecedented departure from this earth will all have to wait. Because as impressive as that all is, today we have Jesus showing himself to us as the God-Man. And that's too impressive to leave behind.

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Just Jesus

Peter, James, and John had seen a lot of impressive acts of God's power throughout their time with Jesus, but they had never seen anything like this. They had been witnesses of Jesus healing countless people with a wide variety of diseases, they were there when he cast out demons, they watched as he raised a little girl from the dead. He had calmed a raging sea with just his words, he had multiplied a handful of food to feed 5000 families, he had walked on the top of the Sea of Galilee – all right in front of them. Peter, James, and John had story after story after story they could tell about just how powerful and incredible and impressive Jesus was, but then they were led up onto that mountain. And there Jesus' face radiated. There Jesus' clothes glowed. There Jesus' presence became so glorious that they couldn't even look at him. And then on top of that, two of the most famous Old Testament Israelite forefathers showed up –

Moses and Elijah – and the starting talking to Jesus. And if that wasn't enough, a deep dark cloud covered them all and God the Father's voice thundered from inside: "This is my Son whom I love, listen to him!"

No one had ever seen Jesus like that before and no one ever would again on this earth. No one had ever laid eyes on Moses or Elijah after the Lord had taken them from this world and no one else in this life ever has since. No one had ever been so up close and personal with both God the Son and God the Father in the middle of their combined magnificent and no one would ever experience that after Peter, James, and John did. This was impressive, to say the least! It was so overwhelming in fact that these three disciples didn't know what to do.

Peter, not surprisingly, had to say something. As Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were deep in conversation, Peter butts in: "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Peter didn't want it to end! He wanted this impressive turn of events to last as long as possible! And who could blame him! We would too if we were there. But of course, it couldn't last. It wouldn't last. That's when the cloud comes down, the voice rumbles around them, and when they look up again, the only thing they see is Jesus. Just Jesus – a human being like they had always seen him as before. But can I make a suggestion? I would suggest that when they looked up and saw just Jesus, *that* was the most impressive thing of all.

Now Jesus shining like the sun – that would have been amazing. Moses and Elijah in person – I'm sure the disciples were thrilled to see them. God the Father's voice – that must have shook them to the core. But the most impressive part about Jesus' transfiguration wasn't the blinding light coming from Jesus or the past Christian leaders showing up unannounced or the audible words of God the Father himself. The most impressive part about this story is that when the cloud lifted and the echo of the voice faded away and Moses and Elijah went back to where they came from, Jesus was still there. Jesus was still there as a real human being. Jesus was still there as a real human being walking down the mountain. That's impressive.

Our Salvation Demanded It

Jesus could have gone back with Moses and Elijah, spending time with his old friends that he had known for centuries, leaving this messed up world behind him. Jesus could have kept radiating too – it was a simple thing for him to display a little bit of his power in this imposing way. He could have remained in the presence of his Father, reveling in his love, basking in his splendor. But Jesus didn't do any of these things. Instead, he wrapped up his glory in regular human skin again, he sent off his old friends to wait for him back in heaven, and he left the protection and the comfort of his Father behind so that he could be like one of us. And he did it all because that's what had to be done to save us. Now that's impressive.

It's impressive that Jesus would walk back down that mountain into the cesspool of sin that was waiting for him. It's impressive that he would willingly continue on a journey that he knew would end in a very unpleasant way. It's impressive that he didn't show anyone else what he did up there on that mountain and he didn't tell anyone else about it either and he even commanded Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone else at the time. It's impressive that Jesus came down that slope intentionally susceptible to pain and torture and even death. And why would the Son of God who could do what he did on top of the mountain do what he did at the bottom of it? Because we would be destroyed if he hadn't.

We would be in a whole world of trouble if Jesus hadn't come down as a real human being that day. We would be completely broken and hopeless and helpless and done because everything would have all fallen on us. We would have been required to keep every one of God's laws perfectly, every one of God's directions precisely, every one of God's commands exactly – and there would be no second chances. It would have fallen on us to love God and trust God and honor God in everything we do and say and think without once slipping up. It would have fallen on us to treat everyone around us with the purest form of compassion and mercy and grace without even a hint of selfish motivations directing what we do. If Jesus hadn't come down as a real human being that day, we would be on the hook for everything we've ever done.

Our past wouldn't just catch up with us, our past would never go away. The awful and the atrocious, the unthinkable and the disgusting, the sick and the narcissistic that we are all guilty of would follow us until the day we died. And there, on that day, these crimes would be held against us for all eternity. We would not be able to talk our way out of it. We would not be able to finagle a deal with the Judge. We would not be able to escape a punishment that would be meted out to the full extent of the law. If Jesus hadn't come down as a real human being that day, we would be undeniably guilty without a chance in you-know-where to avoid ending up in you-know-where. And so... Jesus came down the mountain that day as a real human being.

And what's so impressive about that is that once down at the base of the mountain Jesus started back towards the cross. He walked back towards the city in which he would be tried and convicted and condemned. He made his way back towards the people who had been plotting against him for years and who would soon have a chance to carry out their wicked intentions. Jesus set out that day as a real human being specifically to die. And not just to die, to die for you. Is that not impressive? The perfect God who needs no one, who owes no one, who is obligated to no one, decided to come down as a real human being to make the ultimate human sacrifice. And so he laid his power aside. He held his glory back. He masked his majesty behind a frail human form that was brutalized and assaulted in absolutely horrendous ways. And he did it for you. That's impressive! Your Lord was at his most impressive in his humility, in his pain, in his weakness, in his surrender, in his death.

God died. Impressive. His death paid for your sins. Impressive. God rose from the grave. Impressive! His resurrection has sealed your salvation! Impressive!! He has forgiven you for everything you have ever done and ever will do! Impressive!!! He has promised that he has prepared a place for you in Paradise because he has adopted you as his child through faith in him! Impressive!!!! And all of this is because he came down from that mountain that day as a real human being. Impressive!!!!

Jesus did plenty of impressive things while on this earth: miracles and healings and exorcisms, but there's nothing as impressive as God becoming man – and remaining man – just for us.

So someday I'll preach on the story of Elijah going up into heaven. Someday I'll tackle that wonderful part of the Bible and explore the fascinating aspects of that day and how they apply to our lives. But not now. Not today. Because as impressive as that story is, this morning we have the chance to marvel at God himself willingly being human so that he could bleed and die and rise and win – and so that we can too. Impressive.

Amen.

“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God!” – Rev. 19:1