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The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

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Enter Lent with Jesus' Glory in Mind

When Jesus told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, he understood their confusion. In order to fortify them for the trouble ahead he took them to a mountain. There he pulled back the veil of his humanity and revealed his glory. As we enter the difficult days of Lent, we too view the Savior's glory and praise him that he left the glory behind and went to the cross.

First Reading	2 Kings 2:1-12 <i>Elijah ascends bodily into heaven.</i>
Second Reading	2 Corinthians 4:3-6 <i>God's glory is displayed in the face of Christ.</i>
Gospel	Mark 9:2-9 <i>Jesus is transfigured and reveals his glory.</i>
Sermon	2 Kings 2:1-12

Introduction: What happened on that mountain, the mountain we're talking about today, was really beyond incredible. The three Gospel writers who tell the story use different words and phrases, but the image is the same. Matthew says that **Jesus' face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light**. Luke writes that **the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning**. We heard Mark's account this morning: **His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them**. What happened to Jesus was incredible enough but there's more. Moses and Elijah were there on the mountain, too. Moses had been dead for 1,400 years and Elijah—we heard about him this morning—hadn't been around for 850 years. It was all pretty incredible. Peter didn't want to leave; he wanted to stay on that mountain. **It's good, Lord, to be here.**

Peter couldn't stay. The light dissolved, Moses and Elijah were gone, and the walk to the cross began. We can't stay either. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and worship becomes muted and somber. The alleluias and the Song of Praise go away. I think life is kind of like that. Ever so often we have incredible experiences, but then reality sets in. So we're all hugs and smiles on Valentine's Day but tomorrow we have to shovel the snow and wash the dishes again. The chocolates get eaten and the roses droop. Covid is back and so is the cold.

The story of Elijah is kind of a parable of that reality: Incredible one day and then back to not-so-incredible. The story about Elijah we heard this morning is pretty amazing and so are a lot of stories

about Elijah. But Elijah's life wasn't always fantastic and phenomenal. He had plenty of low times and lean times. There were times when he was discouraged and almost despaired. We know that feeling. We live it a lot.

So let's take a look at Elijah this morning. We're seeing him on his glory day, the day he ascended to God, and we'll see him on Jesus' glory day, the Transfiguration. And when we're done we'll all be able to say:

This Is Incredible!

1. Elijah was a prophet who spoke for God eight centuries before Jesus lived. He spent most of his energy on a king named Ahab and his wife named Jezebel. We've all heard of Ahab and Jezebel. In the First Reading for today Ahab and Jezebel are dead—both died horrible deaths—and Elijah's work is done. He's chosen a successor, a young farmer named Elisha. The first incredible detail is that the Lord is going to take Elijah to heaven in a whirlwind; that's incredible enough but what's just as incredible is that Elijah knows it and Elisha knows it and so do a whole bunch of seminary students. Elijah is moving around; he walks to Bethel, then to Jericho, and Elisha is right behind. They get to the Jordan River and **Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.** Well, that's pretty incredible. Elisha wants Elijah's blessing and his power before he ascends. "OK," Elijah says, "keep your eyes open." **As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.** Wow. That's really incredible. Never happened before and never happened since. Elisha sensed what he had just seen: **The chariots and horsemen of Israel.** And this is what he meant: the great champion of the Lord and his people had just ascended into heaven without dying. Now that's incredible.

Elijah's life was filled with incredible and awesome events. God sent ravens to feed him while he camped out near a ravine. God preserved a little flour in the bottom of a jar and a little oil in the bottom of a jug to support him, a widow, and her son for months. God raised that son from death when he had died. Then there was the stand-off at Mt. Carmel with 450 priests of Ahab's favorite idol when the Lord let Israel know with fire and the sword that he was the true God.

It was right then that the incredible dropped through the floor. Queen Jezebel was coming after him and wanted his blood. Elijah panicked and ran. He grumbled: I worked hard for you and what do I get. He exaggerated: All your prophets are dead and I'm the only one left. He pouted: he traveled alone and hid in a cave. He despaired: Take my life, God; I want to die.

The threat was real; Elijah wasn't running from a ghost. Just like our threats, right? The things that threaten us aren't ghosts, either; they're very real. College education and no job, relationships not working out, children sick or unsettled, cutbacks and layoffs, old age creeping up (I can feel it), savings running out, a hospital stay with no family allowed. Then there are the thoughts that shame us and the words we can't take back and the actions that embarrass us—you know, the sins we commit and the guilt that grinds on us and the punishment we figure we deserve. We know how Elijah felt. All the incredible stuff doesn't take the horrible and hideous stuff away. And sometimes we grumble, and sometimes we exaggerate, and sometimes we pout, and sometimes we almost despair. Right?

2. So there was Elijah, come down from his place in heaven, standing on the mountain with Moses and **talking with Jesus.** Mark lets us assume what the three were talking about, but Luke tells us specifically:

They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. They knew the plan. Just six days before the mountain Jesus told his disciples what the plan was: **The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.**” The disciples didn’t understand; they didn’t want to understand. But Moses and Elijah understood. They knew what it would take to make the sins of the human race go away and not count. They knew the price God was demanding. It required the work of a substitute who was both fully human and gloriously divine. It required a life that stood under God’s law and obeyed. It required a death that was real with real pain and real blood, a painful and bloody death offered to God by his own Son. And with that perfect life and death Jesus paid the price and God started smiling on the human race again. He forgave all their sins and he forgave all your sins, too. That’s incredible!

Long ago Elijah the prophet stood on the mountain of transfiguration and today he speaks to you. In God’s own doing the man who ascended into heaven without death descended from heaven to stand at Jesus’ side. From there he points you to Jesus as your Savior and Lord. This is the Savior, Elijah means to say, who took the horrible and the hideous away. This is the one who grabbed the shame and regret and embarrassment and guilt and punishment of sin from your shoulders and destroyed it. By his appearance on that mountain Elijah means to say to us, “Sleep tight, believer, **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**” With sin destroyed, the threats we face don’t threaten us, not really. In love and wisdom Jesus turns the threats into blessings. We can be sure that **neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** That’s incredible!

When Elijah was at his lowest God sent a great and powerful wind that tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks. But the Lord was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire came a gentle quiet, whisper and the voice of the Lord was in the whisper. And Elijah got back to work.

Faith is not always about the incredible. Peter wanted to stay on the mountain because it was incredible there. But he could not stay and neither could Jesus or Moses or Elijah. It was time for Jesus to go to the cross and the cross would be horrible and hideous. And that’s where we must go, too. But at the cross we will hear that gentle, quiet whisper of God’s love in Christ. And we will live our lives, come what may, in gentleness and quietude and peace. This is incredible! Amen.