

Sermon February 11, 2018

Up, up and away! Cara B. Hochhalter

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

Remember a little poem I quoted once, now I can't remember who wrote it...but it goes like this, "You have one life. Live it. UP!"

But I started thinking about why is it better to be up than down? Is this some kind of *directional prejudice*? The Bible gives the impression that heaven is up and hell is...well, down! "Up" has all kinds of good things going for it...upward mobility, upward bound, moving up in the world, up, up and away! Down...not so good. Down in the dumps, down and out, down and dirty?? Oh, my!

I wonder if this perception of *up* as good and *down* as bad has affected the way we relate to other people in the world...after all, most maps and globes have the Northern Hemisphere on top...up...while the Southern Hemisphere is...down under!

But the earth rotates so there really is no top or bottom, is there?...We are all up *and* down. Have you ever seen an "upside down map"...you can find them online. They have all the continents switched from north to south. It is quite startling. Perhaps we wouldn't feel so "superior" if we lived at the bottom of the map!?

I'm a little carried away, but our scriptures today are about being lifted....UP!

Let us be in prayer: Omnidirectional God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

First we have Elijah...whose faithful companion, Elisha (Some pronounce his name Elisha with a long "i" and others pronounce it Eleesha which makes it easier to distinguish from Elijah) At any rate, Eleesha tries to hang on to his prophet for whom he has been a devoted servant.

Before Elijah is carried up and away, Elisha asks him a peculiar question. He asks for a double portion of his spirit. A "double portion" was something entitled to a first-born son as his inheritance, as recorded in Deuteronomy. So Elisha, with clear devotion, longs to know himself as Elijah's son. He understood God's calling for him to be carry on the work of prophecy and miracles.

It is a dramatic story. The two come to the Jordan River where Elijah takes off his outer robe, rolls it up and smacks the water...the water parts, reminding us of Moses and the Red Sea, and the two walk across...crossing over to the other side, to a spiritual dimension, to a thin place.

Elisha watches as Elijah is taken up by a chariot of fire swept up into the whirlwind...up to heaven. See, heaven is UP!

Poor Elisha....he could not stand being separated from his mentor and in his deep grief, he tears his clothes in two....like tearing his own heart. Have you ever felt like that?

Our Gospel story of being lifted UP...is this one we call *Transfiguration* and it happens every year on this last Sunday before Lent begins. So it is no surprise that this story reminds of us what is coming...the raising up of Jesus, the Resurrection on Easter....but we are not there yet.

Now, I love the Raphael painting on the cover of your bulletin because the artist has Jesus REALLY lifted UP! Esther pointed out to me that in the scripture it doesn't actually say Jesus was *lifted off the ground!* This is true...but many artists have seen it this way! Call it artistic license! Scripture says he was *up on a mountaintop* and suddenly his robes turned dazzlingly white and two prophets, Elijah, whom we know was lifted up by a chariot of fire long before this... and Moses...who had long been dead; these two prophets of old appeared beside Jesus and they talk...not sure what they said.

The poor disciples who were with Jesus: Peter, James and John, were terrified! Can you see in the picture...one is burying his head, and the others shielding their eyes from the brightness of this transfiguring light!

Then comes a big cloud (remember God has spoken through clouds before) so you might suspect that God's voice is about to be heard. "This is my beloved child. Listen to him!" God's beloved son.

How might it lift you up, if you heard that you were a child of God?

I just spent Friday night and Saturday at Rowe Center where I heard two African American women teach about a very important Black theologian in our country, Howard Thurman. I have quoted him before. He was the spiritual mentor for Martin Luther King Jr. and was a professor of religion at Boston University. He was a mystic and way ahead of his time in his understanding of the connectedness of all life...and the value of interfaith relationships.

Thurman's mother was a slave. She told Thurman and his siblings that the slaves had their own minister. A slave minister. And this minister would gather families together and tell them stories. Thurman's mother said the minister... always ended the stories the same way.

Thurman's mother would look up and get a far-away look on her face...and she would say, "The minister always told us, 'You are not slaves, you are God's children. You are God's beloved children.'" And it lifted them up.

In this Transfiguration story, we are reminded of both the baptism of Jesus when God called him beloved...and the resurrection...where he is lifted up. What a story. No wonder we hear it every year. The accounts are quite similar in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Mark is the only one that has the laundry reference...did you hear it? It said his *clothes became dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them!*

A minister once told me he never knew what to do with this story because it was so fanciful and outrageous but I think he lacked a little imagination. To me, the writers of the story wanted us to know that Jesus... held God's Spirit within him in special ways; that Jesus was someone for us to listen to....even as I believe Jesus wanted to point to God, not himself!

The story also tells me that life itself is transfigurable! (My computer says this is not a word.) Life itself is change. We all change as we know too well when we look at our bodies...nothing stays the same....but we are part of the vibrancy that is life...a life infused by the Spirit of God!

Now we come to Peter. He saw this miraculous mirage...Jesus with Moses and Elijah...and he wants to pin it down. He says, "Rabbi, isn't it great that we are here to see this!? Let's make three dwellings, memorials, shrines on this very spot to commemorate the day!" And maybe we will write our names in the stonework to show that we were here, too. Peter, the organizer wants to make this event *concrete* in that particular place and time.

But Jesus says, never mind. Don't bother. In fact, don't even tell anyone...until after I have risen....up. Rodney Hunter writes: "Jesus' mission was not to make a big deal of himself or to elevate his followers to positions of power, authority, and prestige through identification with him. It was rather to point through and beyond himself to God and to God's reign on earth, and to invite his followers to find their voice in bearing witness to this transforming, redemptive God."

Howard Thurman wrote that we cannot take these stories so literally...we have to allow for fluidity and flexibility...and to find God's spirit within them even now, for us! How can you take this idea into your life of being lifted up, being transformed by an Infinite God of love... can we be so moved even in the grounded-ness of our own lives where we perhaps try to organize things too much?

The stories in these scriptures are the framework that holds the Spirit...and this structure has to have many gaps and spaces through which the Spirit can move... We cannot wrap them up too tightly...making them a strict dogma with set interpretations...this is not conducive to a place where the Holy Spirit can move...

Howard Thurman invited people to bridge their minds with their spirits... Thurman said that when we focus our whole lives on bringing our minds and spirits together...our interior lives with our exterior...then transformation can happen. He said God's spirit needs to be allowed to breath with its effervescent energy!

I want to close with a message from the Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers....do you know about them. These are wise grandmothers from indigenous populations around the world who gather every so often. Their wisdom comes from a deep place and they share it with the world:

"As you move through these changing times... be easy on yourself and be easy on one another. You are at the beginning of something new. You are learning a new way of being....You will spend more time experiencing yourself in the whole, and your place in it. Your mother's grandmother knew how to do this. Your ancestors from long ago knew how to do this. Call on this wisdom. Call it up, look up. A breeze is stirring. Feel the sun on your wings."

Let us allow ourselves to be lifted---UP---to hold hands together...and welcome whatever portion of God's Spirit comes our way! You are....children of God.

Amen