

“Mountains Beyond Mountains”

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

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When was the last time you felt completely alive?

The last time you looked around and said: “this is what life is about”?

The last time everything clicked.

The time when you knew you were where you were supposed to be, with the people that you were supposed to be with, doing the things you were supposed to do.

The last time you felt you were living your call in the world?

The last time you were at work and said – this is why I do what I do?

The last time you were with family, or friends – celebrating, mourning, living with loved ones in a golden moment when the usual annoyances and arguments melted away?

The last time you looked out over the world, took a deep breath, and felt rooted in creation, part of the beauty that surrounded you?

The last moment, the last hour, the last weekend, the last holiday, the last project or work week, or vacation week, or month or season of life in which you felt completely alive?

Maybe when work was fulfilling – when you were using your gifts, and your coworkers were using theirs, and everything was coming together into something strange and new and excellent.

Maybe when lost in a project, when the bulbs and seedlings surrounded you in a chorus of hope and potential and promised new life that you were helping to bring forth.

Maybe when on a trip, a happy family enjoying the company of each other and not each other’s phones or browsers or shows.

Or at the wedding, when all the loved ones gathered around the beloved couple, celebrating and smiling and laughing, reminding everyone of the gifts of friendship and joy and love.

Maybe it was the worship service, when the music played the notes of your heart, your prayers felt heard, the message and the liturgy and the light from the stained-glass all combined just-so.

Or the mission, the retreat, the pilgrimage – the long-awaited, long-planned time when soul and body combined to work to transform the world.

When was the last time you felt completely alive?

Moreover, how did it end?

How did it end for you?

When did it end?

Did it end two days before the conference was over? When you pulled out your calendar, and mentally began on the next week of work? Moving yourself ahead, glossing over goodbyes, checking out as you checked back into the real world?

Did it end when you tried to hold on? When you took note of every detail that had brought you to that place, as if, like a recipe, you could re-create the ingredients of transcendence, recombine the elements. Stay in the same room, see the same people, have the same conversation with the same passenger on the plane, read the same book that seemed to articulate and narrate your experience so perfectly?

Did it end while you were denying that such an ending was even possible? That of course you would see these new lifelong friends again – that your quick but meticulous gathering of contact information, addresses and names and phone numbers would be the means of continuing the experience forever, that distance wouldn't impact these relationships, wouldn't change what was possible.

Did it end in tears, months later, as life continued faster somehow, as all of the best intentions came to an end, and you lost touch, the frost came again, the music was never the same, and one morning you sat and remembered how perfect it was, how you felt in that moment, and how every moment since then lacked the same power, and why? Why wasn't it ever the same as that day?

Did it end when you returned to what you'd left behind, and habits and routines quickly grew back over you?

Did it end when everything had changed, and nothing had changed?

Did it end when you came down from the mountain?

We have two examples in our texts, two scriptural moments when Elisha and Peter are having that mountaintop experience, are in the midst of those transcendent times when the world is transfigured and everything enters a special clarity. Two times when they're confronted with coming down from their mountains.

Elisha refuses to let go.

Elisha was a farmboy when Elijah came around. He was in the field, plowing soil behind a team of oxen, when Elijah, the prophet most-revered, came to town at God's command, and Elijah threw his coat over Elisha.

Elisha was stunned, and happy, and filled with joy, knowing he was about to embark on a journey with one who would change his life. Elisha kissed his family goodbye, had a feast with those nearby, and they bade him bon voyage.

Elisha was Elijah's anointed heir, and their travels and ministry together were filled with amazing things. And here, in chapter two of Second Kings, they are coming to an end.

Elisha is in passionate denial. Elisha extends his trip, changes his flights, keeps traveling. Elisha has found meaning in life, found purpose and place and connection in the company of Elijah.

Elisha will not listen to the prophets who bring up the uncomfortable truth. In Bethel, they come to him and ask him how he's dealing with Elijah's imminent departure. And Elisha quiets them – I know, keep silent. In Jericho, they come to him, ask him how he's dealing with Elijah's imminent departure. And he quiets them – I know, keep silent.

Elisha will not listen to Elijah, either. Three times, Elijah tells him to stay. “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” First in Gilgal, then in Bethel, a third time in Jericho. Finally, the two reach the Jordan, cross the Jordan, and reality comes to Elisha. His mountaintop experience is ending. He has clung so tightly to the person that transformed his world, unwilling, unable to say goodbye.

Elijah asks him a final question – what may I do for you, before I am taken from you?

Elisha has postponed departure, refused to let go, refused to believe that there’s any way that his life, his ministry, his sense of belonging, can go on without Elijah there, too. Refused to allow anything to change, in denial of the inevitable, of the obvious, of the way that the world continues to move even when held so tightly.

I have been as Elisha many times in my life, I’m sure we all have. On Monday, I returned from ten days in Colombia, a transforming experience. The Elisha moments came in quiet thoughts – I should come work here for a year, teach at the school, keep visiting churches, preaching, meeting people, learning more, staying longer. There have been others like it before – trips in high school to youth conferences, or mission trips. Graduations, culminations. The last month of seminary, of college. Reunions of friends at weddings or cabins. Family, gathered at holidays that live on and on in memory. Like Elisha, I hold tight, refusing to let the world move. We believe we can stop the spin, prevent the change. Set up near-facsimiles of beloved communities, pretend that we are still on the mountaintop. Not realizing we’ve already gone from Gilgal, to Bethel, to Jericho, and now we stand on the far side of the Jordan and realize that we can no longer hold onto this moment, this time, this season when we felt completely alive.

Today we also meet Peter in a moment of transformation. A moment when Peter is so overwhelmed that he refuses to stay present. Refuses to stay in the moment, to see what is before him.

Peter’s story in Mark is a lot like Elisha’s story. Peter was a fisherman when Jesus came around. He was on the shore, arms filled with nets, when Jesus, the prophet most-revered, came to town, and Jesus called out. Peter was stunned, and happy, and followed. Jesus gave him a new name, Peter, instead of Simon. Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law.

Peter was witness to countless amazing acts – healings, feedings, teachings. Many seemed to go over his head, he never quite understood. Peter was along for a remarkable journey, feeling that he was in the right place, at the right time, where he was called to be.

Finally, Peter starts to understand, starts to feel even more transformed, completely alive, Peter starts to believe Jesus is the messiah. And then they wake up one morning to climb a mountain.

On that mountaintop, Peter’s transformation is a flicker compared to what he witnesses. Jesus, transformed. Transformative figures – Elijah, and Moses, appearing before him. Transforming, dazzling white. Peter’s mountaintop experience is a transformation.

And Peter’s response is a familiar one. Peter comes out of it. Holds it arm’s length. Peter tries to grab hold of the experience, to make sense of it, to pin it down, codify and make it permanent. He copes with dramatic change by normalizing it, rationalizing it. Heart overwhelmed, he turns to his over-active head.

Peter is at the table, awaiting the long-promised meal, and before the food comes, he’s already thinking about how he’ll try to recreate these recipes back home. He’s on the long-awaited trip, sitting in a café in the town he’d only dreamed about, looking at his calendar next year, figuring out when he’ll take the next such vacation. Looking ahead to next year’s crop before this one has sprouted. Seeking to control the change by denying its power.

We have Peter responses, too. When I started planning how I'd come home and share about Colombia before the trip was half over. When I glossed over goodbyes in anticipation of future hellos. Whenever we remove ourselves from the life-changing, transformative moment in which we feel completely alive. Whenever we stop cherishing it, and start studying it to see how we can recreate it. Whenever we ignore the fact that Elijah and Moses are right before us, and instead start planning how we'll build the temples. When we start commemorating the event while it's still going on.

In our text, Elisha gets challenged by Elijah – if you see me as I am being taken from you, then your requests will be filled. Have faith. If you see that this is ending, if you realize and accept, and let go, you will feel more fulfilled. If you are able to let go, to let the world change, and to face that, my power will be with you. Have faith. If you are able to let this end, it will end well, and you will be prepared for what happens next. Trying to keep change from happening is the source of fear of change. Letting go allows this moment to stand on its own.

In our text, Peter gets challenged by Jesus – you can't tell anyone about this. I know you were terrified, I know you didn't know how to respond, I know you were spending your time up there figuring out what you were going to say and what you were going to do to make it permanent, to take the emotion of that moment and spread it forward across time. I know you were laying foundations, focusing on what you thought was right. But you can't tell anyone about this. This moment, this mountaintop experience – was just that - an experience, for you. Not for others, not yet. Have faith. You aren't supposed to be listing ingredients to recreate the dish when you get home – you are to enjoy this present moment. Experience this present moment, fill up on sensory goodness, appreciate the way the light hits the soft dirt, love the company of friends, celebrate this transformational present. Don't plan the next thing, be where you are, have faith that the next moment will come on its own time.

In both cases – for Elisha, for Peter - in all cases, in our lives, every moment can be what life is all about. Every moment lived in faith, lived fully in the present can be a moment when we are rooted in all creation. Every moment can be lived as if we are completely alive. Every moment can be a mountaintop of transformation.

Alleluia, Thanks be to God

Amen.