

**LISTEN TO HIM!****Scripture Readings:** 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9**Texts:** 2 Kings 2:1-3; Mark 9:4-7

Several years ago, the magazine, National Lampoon, did a spoof on the Marvel style comic books—or is that graphic novels—that used Jesus as the superhero in a modern setting. When Jesus said magic words, he transformed into his alter ego as a muscle bound costumed caped superhero who went about defying evil doers and saving those who were being victimized. As you can imagine from National Lampoon, the attempt was rather irreverent with terribly suspect theology.

At the same time, though, the spoof got me to thinking: do we treat Jesus as some kind of super hero? I think there is unspoken belief that when Jesus returns, he's going to storm into the world on his silver cloud and in a violent (even vengeful?) way straighten all the wrongs of the world. The coming Jesus, some imagine, is going to be a super hero who will fight the evil doers in order to preserve truth, justice, and the American way. Now that, I think, is suspect theology.

The gospel writer of Mark wants to understand Jesus and his ministry in another way. Even in this story of the transfiguration we heard this morning, Jesus is not portrayed as super hero but as true to his understanding of his mission and ministry. I think the gospel writer gives us a hint with the inclusion of Moses and Elijah in the story.

A traditional understanding of Moses' and Elijah's appearance is that they are understood by the gospel writer as symbols for the Law (the Torah) and the prophets. Their appearance with Jesus means that Jesus has become the fulfillment of the Law and prophets. I suspect, though, that the gospel writer sees them as something more.

Both Moses and Elijah represent part of the salvation history in the Hebrew Bible. They respond to God's call with their understanding of righteousness and faithfulness to God. In the long run, their response is remarkably similar.

We heard part of the Elijah/Elisha cycle this morning.

Elijah comes to the end of his ministry and passes the responsibility of that ministry onto Elisha. The stories associated with Elisha sound remarkably like some of the stories associated with Elijah—an indication to the story teller that Elijah and Elisha faithfully carry out their response to God's call with a similar understanding.

Elijah understood that his call from God put him in opposition to the cultural trends of his day, especially those trends that had been instituted by Ahab's queen, Jezebel. Jezebel had come from one of Israel's neighbors, the city-state of Sidon, in what we now know as Lebanon. Jezebel was not only a princess but she was also a priestess to Asherah and Baal. Strong willed Jezebel persuaded Ahab, who was supposed to be loyal to YHWH, to also worship her gods and establish temples to them in Israel.

According to the story teller, God punished Israel with a drought. Elijah let Ahab know that the drought was a result of his unfaithfulness to YHWH. Three years later, Elijah announced that the drought would come to an end if he could face the prophets of Baal and the prophets of Asherah on Mount Carmel in a playoff of sacrifices. The odds were against Elijah with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah; and, as the story teller says, all of Israel came to see this epic contest.

The story is dramatic with Elijah applying a bit of showiness for the crowds and in the end, he wins with YHWH accepting his sacrifice and the prophets of Baal failing miserably. Thus Elijah shows the futility of offering sacrifice to Baal and Asherah; he convinces the Israelites to put the prophets to the sword and they do. In an ironic twist, Elijah makes the failure of the prophets of Baal to offer a sacrifice into a sacrifice themselves.

The conclusion of the cycle makes sense with Elisha following Elijah because of the great things Elijah had done. Once Elijah completes his mystical transformation carried off in the chariot of fire, Elisha follows his pattern. Elisha remains faithful to YHWH by demonstrating the same righteousness in conquering those follow the other gods and claiming victory from the conflict.

The gospel writer of Mark believes that Jesus takes a different tack from Elijah and Elisha.

We may miss this difference because lectionary passages tend to be short and focused on the story they present. This story of the transfiguration is a wonderful story but its meanings are more fully appreciated when we put it into context.

We have a clue that this story is part of a larger story when we hear, “six days later.” When we heard that read I hope we asked ourselves, what happened six days before?

Well, I’m glad you asked that because I do want to tell you about it. Jesus had gathered his disciples and he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” The disciples made several attempts to answer when Peter pops up with, “You are the Messiah.” The gospel writer tells us that Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone—in order words, Peter got it right.

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples about his passion, death, and resurrection. Peter finds Jesus’ description of his mission distressing so he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Jesus returns the favor and tells Peter that he’s in the dog house. Then Jesus calls everybody together—even the crowd following along—and tells that in order to follow Jesus, they must deny themselves and take up their crosses. Further, Jesus promises the crowd that some of them will see the kingdom of God come into fullness.

Now six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John on this hike up the mountain. There they have this awesome experience and they see Jesus in the fullness of his glory. We may wonder: is this the conclusion of the statement that Jesus had said six days before—the coming of God’s kingdom into fullness?

When Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, Peter certainly seems to think so. In spite of what the gospel writer says about Peter and his companions, Peter’s statement seems rather adroit. Peter suggests that they build booths—the suggested construction of these booths points to the Jewish festival of Sukkoth. Sukkoth is the conclusion of the fall holidays that includes Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) followed by Sukkoth. Sukkoth was a fall harvest

celebration that was also a remembrance of the Exodus. The booths are constructed as places where people could rest and meditate on the mighty acts of God. The prophet, Zechariah, had proclaimed that God's victory over all the nations that attacked Jerusalem would occur during Sukkoth.

Peter sees Moses and Elijah as those who had overcome God's enemies in violent conflict and could now claim victory. What better way, then, to remember Sukkoth when God is supposed to overcome Israel's enemies. Apparently Jesus' lesson from the week before didn't take—Peter still doesn't get it. No wonder the gospel writer says that the disciples are very confused.

Peter's "confusion" doesn't help us, the readers, to get the story teller's point, but the voice from the cloud does make the point. The voice echoes the saying from Jesus' baptism. We hear God's claim on Jesus as the Beloved but in the place of the statement from servant song in Isaiah, the voice proclaims, "Listen to him." This invitation lets the disciples know that Peter's expectation of victory through conflict is misplaced—Jesus is the servant of God and his path is different. When we listen to Jesus we must watch what he does.

The transfiguration points not toward a heavenly glory but toward the glory of the cross. In his willingness to give himself over to violence, Jesus redirects the violence of Moses and Elijah. Jesus remains righteousness and faithful to God not through violence but in accepting violence done to him and then letting God subvert it through the resurrection. Sacrifice of a scapegoat is futile because God redeems and restores life where we want to destroy it. The cross points to the futility of our violence when God can bring life even in the midst of death.

We follow Jesus not to go out into the world and conquer like some kind of super hero—rather we have been called through Jesus to become agents of life in a world that too often relies on violence in order to show that violence is wrong.

We do not go into the world to conquer in God's name; rather we have been called to follow Jesus in service. Such service is not cheap or even easy; as Jesus demonstrated, our service can be very costly. Yet we trust that God works through us with love so we can feel confident enough to speak for God's justice and hope.

Where the world wants to conquer in victory; we act in God's peace. I think such service and work requires a great deal of courage, but we can know that even in the darkest moments God remains with us and always redeems our work in grace and love.

So, to follow Jesus, we must listen to him and hear the singing of the Servant Song that proclaims the God who delivers the world in God's peace and grace!