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2 Kings 2:1-12

Mark 9:2-9

## EYES AND EARS

I am not wearing a Mummers costume or an Eagles jersey today. But certainly Philly sports fans have been living a dream this past week. There have been jubilant green-clad crowds and parades and fireworks and impassioned speeches and strangers high-fiving one another. For long-frustrated Eagles' fans, it has been a mountaintop experience. We've also seen a great spectacle in the last couple of days that seemed dreamlike with the opening of the Winter Olympic games in South Korea, with parades involving colorful costumes and music and gestures of peace and an amazing fleet of drones and more fireworks. Both were exhibitions for eyes and ears.

It is also an almost dreamlike mountaintop account that we have in Mark's Gospel in our scripture lesson today. And what a surprise it is coming from Mark, the most eyes-wide-open, down-to-earth of the gospel accounts. Through the narrator's description, we get to go to worship with Jesus, Peter, James, and John as they climb to the top of a high unnamed mountain. When they arrive, there is a description that indicates that Jesus' clothes and he himself start to glow. Two of the most famous individuals in Hebrew history who had long since departed this life make an appearance. At that point, a mysterious cloud covers Jesus, his two time-traveling guests, and his three followers. Then the dream for the eyes takes on a revelation for the ears, when a divine voice comes out of the cloud. The whole thing seems like a very surprising dream that goes beyond even Super Bowl and Olympic celebrations.

Perhaps their lives themselves could have been described as dreamlike since Jesus had called his disciples to come with him on what would turn out to be an incredible adventure of wondrous works and faith. As they traveled with him and listened to him, all kinds of questions must have filled their minds about this

remarkably unique rabbi. They found his life and teachings so very engaging. But where did they, where did he fit in the overall fabric of their Jewish religious tradition? A number of the current religious leaders were not immediately ready to welcome Jesus' ministry. How were the disciples to interpret such skepticism? If only they could see how Jesus fit with those who had shaped their faith tradition. Where did he stand over against the great writings of the law and the prophets? Who could be more at the core of their religious tradition than Moses, the great liberator and lawgiver and Elijah, prophet extraordinaire, who we heard about being swooped up by a chariot of fire in our first reading? In Mark's amazing dreamlike story, that is exactly who shows up, even though it is twelve and nine centuries after one might expect to see them.

Once Peter, James, and John figured out who was standing there talking with Jesus, the three disciples must have had a hard time keeping their eyes in their sockets and their jaws from hanging open. Talk about a historic gathering – this was one that transcended the limits of time! Mark doesn't tell us whether the disciples were close enough to hear the conversation that was taking place between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. That is because even this beyond-one's-wildest-dreams conversation was overshadowed by what would be said by another voice.

Our ears had been told of that voice previously. When Jesus had been baptized we heard a voice from heaven saying to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This time the voice is from a cloud. Clearly it is God's voice which says to Jesus' followers: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

This is one of the stories from scripture that help us in the Reformed tradition know the lines of authority for us as Christians. As Presbyterians, we have always been people of the book. The writings of the law and the prophets, along with the gospels and epistles hold high authority for us. These aren't just stories from long ago that have little to do with our lives today. We, like Elisha in our first passage, look for ways we can continue the earlier ministry that preceded us, which is part of the reason scripture is important to us. Now, of course, as people of faith, we don't always agree about how to interpret those scriptural texts. Some Christians see the bible as a book of inerrant facts. But most Presbyterians see it more as an

authoritative witness to Christ, a divine message that comes to us through Spirit-inspired human documents that also exhibit some human limitations. Different parts of scripture were written in a variety of contexts and we do well to take into account those original situations as we seek to understand God's word as it applies to us today. There are a variety of issues about which scripture does not have a unified witness. Church fights over such matters can turn into a nightmare. However, in such situations, we are not left in a cloud, not knowing which voice pulls the most weight. God's voice says, "Jesus is my beloved Son; listen to him!" The law and the prophets, represented by Moses and Elijah, point toward him. Jesus is our highest authority. For us as Christians, he is the clearest revelation of who God is, and he shows us who God calls us to be. He is Lord of all and Head of the church. We interpret the law, the prophets, and the rest of scripture in light of Jesus Christ. When scripture is not clear, we look to him. When we are mystified by a mountaintop or more mundane experience, God's guidance can come through Christ.

However, listening to Jesus needs to go beyond just the situations where there is a biblical conflict. Many of us have gotten overly familiar with Jesus' message in word and deed, with the result that we don't realize how surprising a dream for humanity he tells. We come to worship, gathering in his name, and may not expect much to happen. Writer Annie Dillard is critical of such a mindset and expresses it this way: "Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does not one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares: they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to wherever we can never return." <sup>1</sup>

Perhaps if we listened more closely to Jesus as our highest authority, we would perceive worship along with the other times we focus on Jesus in a wholly different way. As his followers, we would actually go where he leads, not just comment that we heard another nice story about Jesus today. If we significantly awaken to the God revealed in Jesus Christ and truly make him our highest authority, then no longer will we sleepwalk through worship or through life itself. Instead we will find ourselves filled with the most powerful down-to-earth, eyes-and-ears-wide-open while-we-are-awake dreams that open our hearts to whole new possibilities for reality itself. Wouldn't that be something to see and to hear? For it truly changes everything when we get to the point that we say and mean: 'All authority and honor and glory be to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, now and forevermore. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters, Harper Perennial, Revised edition, 2013.