

Feb. 11, 2024

The thing about the Bible is we only seem to celebrate the big things. In the Old Testament, it's the epic events that grab our attention. Creation. The Flood. Joseph's story. The Exodus. These are landmark moments that we always seem to recall – we use these to set the tone for whatever comes next.

The story from second Kings can be like that. A story of a transition – the 'passing of the torch' from Elijah – the 'greatest of the prophets' – to his chosen successor, Elisha.

It's a very strange moment – full of mystery and intrigue; full of symbolism and even sarcasm. It is a commentary on the fickle nature of mortal life – and it contains hope (believe it or not) where the constancy of God's care is concerned. In the end, Elijah is gone (dead) and Elisha mourns his loss...and then picks up the pieces (and his master's mission) and get's back to the business of living.

It is a big thing - the loss of Elijah; and it is described in fantastic fashion. Dramatic and cinematic – flaming chariots, horses (and a whirlwind, for good measure.) But I'll suggest that in this story – as in many of our favourite stories from Scripture – it is the little things that matter most.

Forget about the spectacular. Don't give the manner of Elijah's departure a moment's thought. If that is how it happened, you'll never figure out why. And if this is just a metaphor for what transition looks like in the company of the faithful, let it be a metaphor. Learn to live with the exceptional and the fantastic.

Let it be a mystery.

Feb. 11, 2024

Let's think about the determination of Elisha. His master tries to spare him the trouble of knowing too much or seeing too much. Elijah is trying to keep their parting mysterious, but Elisha is having none of it. He is a faithful companion. He would honour his master to the end.

Elisha's determination is evident in a profusion of little things.

"You know your master is nearing the end of his (earthly) journey?" The prophets seem cruel in their questioning, but Elisha knows the score. He is keeping his eye on the future. There is a change coming, and Elisha is doing his best to prepare for it, one tentative step at a time.

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The New Testament has its share of big moments too. From Jesus' birth to his crucifixion and resurrection (well maybe that's all of the big moments) – but I would include Paul's conversion, and the letters and reflections of Peter, James and John. There are plenty of landmark moments - from Matthew to Revelation - and this brief encounter on the mountaintop is one of them.

Jesus is walking his friends towards the next big thing. In Mark's gospel telling, where so much seems to be a mystery – when so often the disciples seem clueless – Jesus invites his closest friends to take time apart. This moment on the mountain gives Peter, James and John a peek behind the curtain. A vision of the cosmic Christ – flanked by two heroes of the faith. It is an overwhelming vision, one which Peter hopes to capture in perpetuity. He is in awe (and terrified) at the sight of Jesus, Moses and Elijah – and so the voice from heaven just adds to the confusion and the consternation...and then, just as suddenly, only Jesus.

Feb. 11, 2024

A miracle? An extension of the mystery? A collective hallucination? A metaphor? Surely this gospel moment is all of those things – and we ‘celebrate’ it every year, just before we start the thoughtful, sometimes fretful journey that is Lent.

The disciples are instructed not to tell – another common feature in Mark’s gospel. And why would they? It is impossible to reconcile these fantastical, holy visions. They are almost always misunderstood by those who haven’t experienced them. Who would believe it in the end?

But for Peter, James and John, the echoes of this encounter will help them navigate the many remarkable things that will happen as they make their way towards Jerusalem in Jesus’ company. It may never make sense to them – at least not until ‘the son of man has risen from the dead.’ And between these two epic events...a thousand little thing will conspire to build lives and communities of faithfulness.

We are always travelling between highlight moments. Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries; each of these (and many more) mark the calendar for us and give us targets to aim for. The big things matter, make no mistake. But all the ‘in-between’ things are what build us up. The collective experience along the way is what we celebrate in those big moments. Jesus in a crowd of heavenly visitors is a remarkable sight.

We may think that there, on the mountain, is where we’d prefer to spend our days.

Feb. 11, 2024

But Jesus calls us down the hill, looking quite ordinary and alone. Jesus invites us to walk with him with our eyes open for wonder and wisdom. The big things are important; magnificent; satisfying.

But Jesus would also have us experience the ordinary, the mundane; the everyday miracles that crowd around us along the way.

On the edge of a season of prayerful reflection and intentional repentance, we take this moment to mark our place and remember the majesty and mystery of the God-story in which we are all participants.

We prefer the big moments – the high holy days with all the flash and dazzle – but the trip down the mountain in awestruck silence is, for the disciples and for us, a reminder that the little moments, taken together are what matter most.