



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Carrying On

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 15, 2015

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on 2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9

Last weekend, nineteen of us from St. Bart's voyaged up to Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, NY, across and just up the river from Poughkeepsie, where we spent a wonderful, nourishing, peaceful weekend. It felt a perfect balance of fellowship and solitude, of silence and monks chanting, and conversation. There was close to two feet of snow on the ground—beautiful pure white snow. The frozen Hudson River creaked in the distance. There was wintry—but easy—walking on perfectly clear plowed roads. No slushy corners anywhere.

Now, another weekend, another snowstorm, the fourth in what seems like as many weeks. We narrowly escaped this time; our neighbors in New England were not so lucky. It was still a big weekend with Valentine's Day, a holiday, and the opening of a hotly anticipated movie. True New Yorkers know what *Fifty Shades of Grey* really is: the color of snow in New York City.

You may remember another movie, one released slightly over thirty years ago, called "Chariots of Fire." It's a British film based on a true story of two athletes in the 1924 Olympics: one a devout Scottish Christian who runs for the glory of God, the other an English Jew who runs to overcome prejudice. The title "Chariots of Fire" was inspired by the line, "Bring me my chariot of fire," from William Blake's poem, whose words are adapted into the British hymn tune "Jerusalem." William Blake's line is taken from the 2 Kings reading we just heard [2:11 and 6:16-18.].

You may also remember that Elijah is one of only two people in the Hebrew Scriptures who did not experience human death. The first is Enoch (Genesis 5:24), whose going to God was much less dramatic. He simply "walked with God ... he was no more, because God took him." Elijah is the other one who doesn't die; God takes him directly to heaven.

The prophet Elijah's being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind with chariots and horses of fire is certainly one of the most dramatic images in the Bible. It's certainly the most dramatic non-funeral I know. We have that image in one of our Chapel stained-glass windows. The text doesn't exactly say Elijah rode in the chariot; it says he went up in the whirlwind, with chariots and horses of fire. This draws on the ancient image of Yahweh, the Lord, as commander and chief charioteer of the heavenly host [Psalm 68:4, 17]. The Lord has come to pick Elijah up, or at least sent his heavenly host to fetch him.

The scene we have today in Mark's gospel, the Transfiguration, is also pretty dramatic: Peter and James and John with Jesus up on the mountain. Suddenly Jesus' clothes become an unearthly, dazzling white. Elijah and Moses appear, too. This is an image we St. Bartians know well, because it's right in front of us each time we gather in this space: the incredible mosaic over our altar shows the Transfiguration scene.

This week, I noticed a detail I'd overlooked all the other times I've read this Mark passage. Elijah and Moses and Jesus are all talking together. A friend studying this same passage this week asked me, "What do you think they were talking about?" The text doesn't say, but she and I had some fun speculating: Are they catching up after several hundred years apart? Comparing notes? So, how've you been? Whazzup? How 'bout that game?

These two dramatic images of Elijah and the Transfiguration are in our readings for this last Sunday before Lent, but drama isn't the point. I think these two readings have something particular to say to us at St. Bart's at this time in our life as a parish.

Elijah, who leads the Israelites 400 years after Moses, patterns many of his actions on those of Moses. Moses' successor was Joshua. Elijah's successor is to be Elisha. There are many parallels between Moses-Joshua and Elijah-Elisha.

Elijah is Elisha's mentor. Elisha is Elijah's student, his disciple. The relationship between prophet and disciple is a relationship of great intimacy, more like father-son. It is time for Elijah to leave. Three times Elijah tries to separate from Elisha; three times Elisha insists on staying with him. Three different companies of prophets from the three different places they visit ask Elisha, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" Each time Elisha's replies sound abrupt and harsh, even rude: Yes, I know that—shut up!

We know from personal experience, don't we, that sometimes when someone gives a terse or harsh-sounding reply, the tone is about what's going on inside them—it's not about us. Elisha may not be so much short-tempered as in a tense emotional state. He's likely grieving, already missing his mentor's company, his leadership, their own close relationship. Elisha, we might say today, is showing signs of anxiety, wondering how he will get on without his mentor, what life will be like without him.

Elisha appears to be clinging—stubbornly or faithfully, depending on our perspective—to Elijah, not wanting to let go. Perhaps that's not Elisha's being in denial or pathetic or needy; maybe it reflects the closeness and depth of their relationship, the true respect and genuine affection they have for each other.

We see that tendency, too, with Peter in the Transfiguration story. After experiencing Jesus in blinding white talking with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop, Peter's inclination is to build three dwellings: let's stay there, let's hold on to that very special experience.

Both of these stories are about times of transition. Having recently learned that our own beloved leader needs to leave us in several months, we at St. Bart's may find ourselves able to identify with Elisha and Peter's actions and feelings. I have. When I first heard the news of Buddy's retirement, I cried. Then I tried to talk Buddy into staying just another 6, 7, 10, 12 years, until I could retire along with him. I considered offering him my life savings to stay. Then I thought surely something would happen to change things—maybe he will change his mind. Maybe you have done your own version of these?

It is only natural to feel this way, isn't it, when we have such a beloved leader, when we have had a mountaintop experience. It's normal and healthy to grieve such a loss, and we need to do that. We may carry on a bit. I hope and expect that we will be gentle and compassionate with ourselves. We are human.

Now, we know that Buddy is not Elijah (or Jesus), though he is a great leader and I believe he does have prophetic tendencies. He may well leave us in a whirlwind. Fire (and incense) may be somehow involved. Buddy may leave in a chariot, but it I venture to say it will be more of the chauffeured limousine variety, or perhaps Uber, headed up Park Avenue.

We may carry on a bit. And then we will Keep Calm and Carry On. I hope and expect that we at St. Bart's will go forward with courage, trusting and relying on each other, trusting and relying on God. We will continue to listen for God's still small voice. We'll continue to do the work God gives us to do.

If you read the next few verses, you find that Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle and he carries on. Jesus and Peter and James and John do not stay on that mountain; they come down the mountain and they carry on.

The real story is that God carries on. God carries on, acting through gifted and flawed human beings like Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha and those companies of prophets. God carries on, acting through gifted and flawed human beings like Peter and James and John and the others.

The bright light of the Transfiguration shines on, affirming that God is with us.

The bright light of the Transfiguration shines on, affirming that God is with us, that God is carrying on—and will continue to carry on—acting through the gifted, flawed, beloved community of St. Bart's.

Amen.

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