

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, February 11, 2018)

Text: **2 Kings 2:1-12** and **Mark 9:209**

(Please note: Pastor Donald and our Liturgist Elsie Stanley,
read our scripture for us as a dramatic reading as noted in this version below.)

PASTOR: Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha,

LITURGIST: “Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said,

PASTOR: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him,

LITURGIST: “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” And he said,

PASTOR: “Yes, I know; keep silent.” Elijah said to him,

LITURGIST: “Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho.” But he said,

PASTOR: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him,

LITURGIST: “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” And he answered,

PASTOR: “Yes, I know; be silent.” Then Elijah said to him,

LITURGIST: “Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said,

PASTOR: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha,

LITURGIST: “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said,

PASTOR: “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” He responded,

LITURGIST: “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out,

PASTOR: “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

(Slight pause.)

LITURGIST: Six days later, three of them did see it. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain.

PASTOR: His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them.

LITURGIST: Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus. Peter interrupted,

PASTOR: “Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah.” He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.

LITURGIST: Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice:

PASTOR: “This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him.”

LITURGIST: The next minute the disciples were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus, only Jesus.

PASTOR: Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy.

LITURGIST: “Don’t tell a soul what you saw. After the Son of Man rises from the dead, you’re free to talk.”

PASTOR: They puzzled over that, wondering what on earth “rising from the dead” meant.

LITURGIST: May our hearts be opened to behold God’s glory shining in Christ, in prophets, and in saints who inspire us.

PASTOR: May our commitment to face injustice and oppression courageously be refreshed as we face Jerusalem and the Lenten journey to come. Amen.

Pastor Pastor’s Reflections: “Light and Noise”

Please pray with me:

We climb mountains seeking you, God, but not knowing quite what we are looking for. Your presence appears as a voice from the clouds, bright as dazzling light, as incomprehensible mystery, the extraordinary breaking through into the ordinary, and we are touched by the holy.

In these high places, in the thin places, we see, we hear, we know you, God – closer, deeper, beyond imagining, beyond expressing.

Take us to the thin places. Lead us to moments of epiphany and revelation.

Guide us to thin places where holiness touches ordinariness, and where we long to see you face to face. Amen.

As some of you may already know, the expression, “thin places” comes from the Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller.

As Sylvia Maddox explains in her article, “Where Can I Touch the Edge of Heaven,”:

“A thin place is where the veil that separates heaven and earth is lifted and one is able to receive a glimpse of the glory of God.

“A contemporary poet Sharlande Sledge gives this description.

*“Thin places,” the Celts call this space,
Both seen and unseen,
Where the door between the world
And the next is cracked open for a moment
And the light is not all on the other side.
God shaped space. Holy.”*

And although there are many theologians and scholars who would warn us against upholding this idea of there being a particular place in this world where God is more present to us than others, I think most of us would have to agree that what we witness today in Mark’s gospel as Jesus transfigures on a mountain and in 2 Kings where Elijah is taken up into a whirlwind beside the Jordan river would certainly qualify as thin places where God’s hand touches earth and the veil is lifted for those souls standing in for us, Peter, James, John, and poor left behind Elisha.

And I had to wonder in reading these texts what thin places God is taking us to in our day and time and whether such places can exist for us in our own lives.

You can be certain that if there was a place where the veil was known to be lifted if even for just a moment, there would be millions of pilgrims crawling on their hands and knees to get there and experience it.

But what I believe God is saying to us through these scriptures and fantastic scenes is that the thin place is actually right there with us, in easy a reach as creating a place for God to be present in our awareness of God as I spoke about last week, and in our openness to experience the sacred and to quiet the noise and to enter the light shining right there in front of us.

Like Peter, I think we humans are so ready with the quick question or the rapid response, the need to make some sense out of everything that’s happening and apply our exquisite logic and reason to every moment of our lives that we often miss out on the thin place wherein God is being revealed.

Maybe we’re just a little too THICK to realize it.

Sometimes, I think God needs us to just shut up, if you will, and dwell in the quiet light; to allow ourselves to be amazed at that which we don’t completely or at all understand and take the time to be in awe before our God and in the glory God is creating.

Many times it’s our fear that keeps us from experiencing the glory God is creating. We’re terrified of entering that thin place because we don’t know what’s on the other side of the veil. What if it’s something I can’t handle? What if it’s bigger than I am?

What if my reasoning and my logic don't have any power there? I need to be in control and that means I'll just stay over here and cling to what I already know thank you very much.

We see this in the fabulous story of Elijah and Elisha (as a kid I always wondered why they couldn't have just a bit different names so I wouldn't mix them up all the time). But it makes sense that these two only differ by a couple letters in their names because in a way they are the expressions of the younger and the older self both in chronological and especially spiritual terms.

Here is Elijah, the old prophet, having done his work and knowing that it is time to go and readying himself and his protégé for his departure to the other side of the veil.

But what's the younger Elisha's response? "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you," he pleads again and again. IN today's phraseology it might sound more like, "no, no, don't leave me, I'm not ready!"

Rather than getting quiet and allowing the final moments with his master to really soak in and gain from them all he can, he spends his time telling OTHERS to be quiet when they tell him the truth and trying to avoid the inevitable instead of embracing it and learning from it.

In much the same way, we see Peter on the mountain with Jesus unable to enter a place of quiet and contemplation as he witnesses the Christ's transfiguration and Moses and the earlier referenced chariot-riding Elijah come in to view and start up a conversation. Rather, he has to interject something ridiculous and banal, almost as if he's trying to curry favor or show that he can be of some use in this extraordinary time and place.

One can almost see Jesus rolling his eyes and perhaps even putting a finger to his lips to hush the spiritually immature man, encouraging him to enjoy and learn from the moment instead of asserting his need to insert himself into it.

Because, you see, sometimes the noise gets in the way of the light we're invited to experience.

That got me to thinking about the ways in which we are often so quick to jump in with our own opinions and our own just amazing way of looking at something -- other's experiences or even our own -- that we lose the opportunity to get at the bigger truth and to allow what God is making happen unfold in God's way and in God's time.

In pastoral counseling, we're taught to shut up and get out of the way of our own inner conversations and judgments and allow the person with whom we're speaking to open up and find their own truths.

Many times, in fact, we have to learn to be comfortable with the silence in order for the truth to be discovered and revealed.

I've learned that many greater things can happen in God's space when we sit quietly within it than when we try to control it with our own oh-so-wonderful insights and what we believe to be our exquisite wisdom.

The wonderful writer and quiet thinker, Rev. Melissa Bane Sevier puts it this way:

"We talk too soon and too much, when sometimes we just need to let the silence stand a little longer. We're afraid, like Peter, or we're anxious or rushed or impatient or even uncaring.

"When someone wants to discuss a concern, we should offer an ear rather than jumping in with advice. When there's a conflict, taking sides early on without lots of listening can short-circuit the process or contribute to driving the parties farther apart. When someone disagrees with us, instead of forming our arguments while they are speaking, we ought to hear carefully both what they are saying and imagine what deeper values may lie behind the issues in both the other's perspective and ours."

This is the way we bring God's light to every situation I think. Shifting our own thoughts and opinions and judgments to the back of our minds and allowing ourselves to be quiet, we are far more able to enter that thin place with God and gain the true wisdom that only God can offer.

"We don't have to have all the answers," Rev. Melissa writes. "When we are still, we make ourselves open to new experiences, to learning from others, to input from the Spirit.

"We just need to close our mouths and open our hearts and minds."

Amen.