

SERMON 916

February 15, 2015

Last Sunday after the Epiphany

985th Week as Priest

812th Week at St Dunstan's

77th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee



A TRANSFORMING LIFE

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

I have long believed that the sacred stories of the Bible are never finally written until we discover them in the experiences of our own lives. Yes, they most certainly have essential meaning and purpose in the context that they were written. This, alone, makes the Bible the “most important of books.”

But there is more with the ways of God, always more than meets the eye. We discover ourselves in the sacred stories; we find ourselves as principal characters in the holy text. The Canadian theologian Herbert O'Driscoll says that we should “put on the stories, as we would a garment.” This image of wearing a garment or cloak carries a special meaning given the lesson from the Second Book of Kings.

Elijah the old prophet is coming to the end of his life, and he senses that God is preparing to take him away. Elijah's young protégé Elisha has been traveling with him for many days. At several points in their journey, the old man urges Elisha to stay and go no farther, but he will not abandon his mentor. Finally they come to the Jordan River, where Elijah takes off his mantle and strikes the water with it. Like Moses at the Red Sea, the waters are parted and the prophets cross over to the other side. Once across, Elijah says, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” The younger man asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. It is a difficult request to satisfy, one that requires vision and insight on the part of the younger man. But sure enough, as Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind of fire, Elisha sees the chariot of fire and the horses. He is granted his heart's desire.

He is made a prophet of God, so he takes up his master's mantle and crosses over to the other side.

The story is an important one. It is a fullness of time. Elijah must go in order for Elisha to inherit his life's work. Responsibilities pass from one generation to the next. Each of us is a part of all that has come before. In the midst of life we are in death, says the Prayer Book. Such lessons as these would be valuable to us on their own. But the sacred story never ends here. Its ultimate meaning is found in the context of each person's life—in yours and mine.

Five years ago, my mentor Dr. Ward Allen and his wife Peggy were preparing to leave Auburn for Lexington, Kentucky. For fifty years, the Loveliest Village had been their home. Ward was a gifted teacher and one of the preeminent scholars of the King James Bible of the twentieth century. Now he was moving away, and I knew that I would not see him again.

Leigh and I had moved to the Elms in large measure because the Allens would be our next-door neighbors. After twenty-five years of being away from Auburn, I had picked right up where we left off—walking in the woods and fields, talking about poetry and the power of words, telling stories and discovering anew the

remarkable ways in which God speaks to us today. And now he was leaving, going away never to return. I walked to the Overseers House that morning to say goodbye, and I cried like a little boy to see them go.

“What will I do now?” I asked in my sorrow.

“Well, Father Wells,” said Dr. Allen, “it’s time to grow up.”

That’s what I have tried my best to do over the past five years, and I’ve learned a lot about myself, and the life of faith, and the people of God. I think I have been transformed.

Early in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus takes his trusted disciples James, John, and Simon Peter—and he leads them up a high mountain. There he is transfigured before them. It is a magnificent sight! His robes become dazzling white, and he is joined by Elijah and Moses. A pillar of cloud surrounds them, and the voice of God says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

It is a dramatic transformation, most certainly a fullness-of-time moment in the lives of James and John and Peter. Jesus is changed, to be sure, and they see him for the first time as the Son of God in his Father’s glory.

But they are changed as well, and their lives will never be the same again.

This is the way that life works. The life of faith will change you. Life in the Christian community will develop and shape the person you become. And you will never be the same.

Try as we might, we cannot stay the same. The person you were as a child has grown up and become the man or woman you are now. You have put away childish ways. You have taken on responsibility and you are continuing to grow into the full stature of Christ. Now you are called to live a life of love and service to others, in the Name of Jesus Christ. And there is no going back. Well, almost always there is no going back.

Ward and Peggy Allen have returned to Auburn, and Dr. Allen and I have resumed our walks as before. We still walk the woods and fields, and we still talk about God and poetry and the power of words. But something is different now. Something has changed.

It is I. I am a different person now. I feel like a grown man for the first time in my sixty-two years. Not that I am through learning, or that I have any special wisdom or new skills. Rather that I am being transformed, more and more each day, into the priest

and the man that God has been calling me to become. Christ is developing and shaping me into his disciple. I am becoming his servant.

And here is the best news of all: *So are you*. You are being changed, by the renewal of your mind, more and more each day, into the fullness of the stature of Christ Jesus. Just imagine the person you are becoming! Just imagine the pleasure our Father finds in you this day!
AMEN.