

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, February 15, 2015

2 Kings 2:1-12

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, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "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, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "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, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "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, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "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, "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.

This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God!

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight, O God. You are our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever heard someone exclaim: 'Don't confuse me with the facts!'"? Or have you ever heard someone say: 'I never let the facts get in the way of my decision making!'"?

Because today's scriptures remind me that when it comes to our faith, and when it comes to God's Holy Word, it can be really hard figuring out the facts from what we believe.

What are the facts surrounding Elijah's ascension into heaven? Horses and chariots of fire are in the story, but were they really there, or were they just symbols?

The two books of Kings, First Kings and Second Kings, were written as a continuous history of Israel from the death of David (970 BCE) to the release of the exiled King Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon (561) BCE. This represents nearly 400 years of stories and history, but most certainly does not contain eyewitness accounts of any of the stories contained in the two books.

What does that mean as far as the facts go? Folklore, family stories handed down from generation to generation (20 generations span these two books by the way....) With retelling, and interpretation, where do the facts fit in, and where does the meaning of the story fit in, separate from the facts?

I'm willing to share with each of you a bold confession: I don't need horses and chariots of fire in order to believe that Elijah, a great prophet, ascended into heaven in front of Elisha. Quite frankly, there isn't really anything about this story that affects my faith, or the practice of my faith in real life.

So in some ways, we don't know the facts about this story, but we still have faith.

Similarly, what are the facts surrounding the Transfiguration of Jesus? One important fact is that the gospel was written about 65 years after Jesus rose from the dead. Meaning the author did not witness the things recorded in this book.

We don't really have any facts to rely on here, but we have our faith. Is a Transfigured Jesus necessary for us in order to believe that he was the Son of God? Maybe, maybe not.

If some scholar came out with proof that Jesus was never on that mountain, and never became dazzling white, would it mean that he isn't our Lord and Savior? Of course not!

While much of the bible is written in a style that includes stories and what seems like history, we sometimes forget that the Word of God in the form of the bible is much more about symbols and metaphor, much more about faith than facts. And we could easily get off on the wrong path if we looked to the bible to inform us about how old the earth is, or how it was formed.

There is a world of difference between facts and faith. Now that doesn't mean that people of faith are ignorant, or uneducated, it means that those of us who practice our faith can put whatever facts we have available to us into the proper perspective in order to be faithful.

Old testament miracles, like the parting of the Red Sea, or the plagues...New Testament miracles like turning water into wine, walking on water, raising Lazarus from the dead, being raised from the dead himself, these are parts of our faith...do they need to be facts, in order for them to be a part of our faith?

We each get to decide. But let me reassure you that the interplay between facts and faith are fluid, and it's up to each of us to decide how we receive the facts from scripture, and how we apply them to our faith.

In the days that our gospel was written, supernatural happenings were signs that Jesus was who he said he was. Those things don't happen anymore, at least they don't for me.

But I won't let the fact that Jesus doesn't appear before me, beckoning me to join him on the journey get in the way of believing that he *does* call me and you into service, into ministry.

What are the facts around the Transfiguration? We can't know them. What we might know about the story is obscured by 65 years of retelling, and now about 2000 years of interpretation.

What is the truth? That Jesus is God's Son, God's beloved. That Jesus is our Lord and Savior, that Jesus died for our sins, and triumphed over death so that we might be forgiven. No facts can help us come to that conclusion...only truth and faith can do that.

What facts do we have about Dylan-Michael's baptism today? That I prayed, and put water on his head, and welcomed him into the church of Jesus Christ. But the truth is that his parents have promised to raise him faithfully, according to their gifts, and their faith, and that this congregation has promised to help, wherever possible.

Dylan-Michael has all of us to assist him, until he decides to affirm his baptism on his own, through confirmation. Where he will consider the facts, and weigh the truth, and make his own decision about how he will practice his faith.

Thank be to God that FCC UCC has grown by one family, and that the family of God has grown by one soul. Amen.

