

Sermon for the Last Sunday After the Epiphany: Mark 9:2-9 & 2 Kings 2:1-12

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I'd like to take y'all on a trip this morning to a far off and wondrous land. So, hop in your cars, put on your favorite driving music, buckle up, and settle in for the long haul. The first leg of the trip is the worst, mostly because it takes you through Virginia, and nobody wants that. However you like to get to 81, do that, and then go south for what's gonna feel like 19 days. When you get to Virginia, you're nearly finished with the first jaunt. But don't be tempted to stop for dinner in Virginia. They're just far enough south to think highly of themselves, but they go about being South all wrong. Their cornbread is sweet and their tea isn't. Godless heathens. Keep going into Tennessee. Now, you could hop on 40 heading west here if you're in a hurry, but Fr. Steve's place in Chattanooga (and his delightful mother Helen) are only a slight detour, and if you want a cheap place to stay with a guaranteed experience for breakfast at Aretha Frankenstein's pancake and waffle shack, it's well worth the extra hours in the car. Plus, the next day you'll get to swing by Sewanee, the Disneyland of the Episcopal Church, and ooh and aah at the wonders of The Domain.

Back on the road, you'll skirt Nashville, pray your way through Memphis's poor city planning, hold your breath across the Mighty Mississipp, and enter into God's Country -- Arkansas. Now, these flatlands are not the best introduction to the state. The first couple of miles are rich farmland, but they represent one of the narrower portions of the Big Muddy's floodplain, and every year the Mississippi breaks her banks and claims a bit more of Arkansas for her own. You'll soon find yourself in West Memphis, which is a real shame. The highway construction here has been going on in the same place for longer than I've been alive. Grip that steering wheel tight, watch out for the concrete walled median, and you'll be home free soon enough. Forrest City, dubiously named for the Confederate general, will come and go. From the Interstate, all you'll see is just an exit and some gas stations, and that's enough. There'll be some billboards quoting scripture and some mighty tempting signs for barbecue and fried catfish. Once you clear Crowley's Ridge, it's safe to stop at just about any of these, though I can't make any promises regarding the state of the restrooms at any point along this particular stretch of road.

Right about the time your lumbar support starts giving out and you're convinced you must've missed some direction on your GPS, the 18-wheelers and overly ambitious minivans'll spread out across another lane or two, on-ramps become more frequent, and rice fields get replaced by an Air Force base and a Maybeline factory. Ah, civilization. You've made it to Little Rock! Stop wherever you like. It's good people, good food, and if you can find Christ Church right off the Interstate, good religion. Ask for Carol Lou or wake up Betty Lee for a tour of the place. Between them, those two ladies have over 120 years of work experience in that same building. They've got some stories.

The last stretch of our drive is shorter, only about an hour or so, but with a weary backside, it's sure to feel longer. But have no fear. The landscape is on your side now. You'll see more water, hills roll, and the road itself actually turns. No more straight shot driving! You'll pass Maumelle, a suburb my parents lived in when I was in college. You'll drive through one of those mythical dry counties and the city of Conway, one-half of the origin of Conway Twitty's stage name and home of Becca's and my alma mater. Keep going. There's not much else to see through here except for increasingly beautiful landscape. You're almost there! Take exit 108 and hang a left at the end of the ramp. This puts you right on the outskirts of Morrilton, but we're not interested in the town (unless, of course, you need a snack at this point, in which case I recommend the Blue Diamond Cafe for a milkshake and an order of fried pickles).

This part of the world holds a good stretch of the Arkansas River and some mighty fine bottomland, but it's also home to the edge of the Ouachita Mountains and the Ozark Plateau. The road you're pattering along goes through low rolling flatland, but up ahead a single mountain waits like the prow of a great ship. That's

Petit Jean Mountain, and it's our destination. You heard that right, by the way. That's "Petty Gene" not "petEE zhahn." Just 'cause the French named it doesn't mean Arkansawyers kept it that way. The road up the mountain is narrow with tight, twisting turns and the occasional surprise boulder blocking a lane of traffic. It's hair-raising the first time you drive it, but once you get the hang of where the turns come, it's a treat in a stick shift. Petit Jean's grave is off to the right, a beautiful location with turtle rocks and a stunning view of the bottomland you just drove through with the river stretching off towards Little Rock farther away than your eyes can make sense of. The next turn takes you to a retreat center put up by Winthrop Rockefeller, which is neat, I guess, but it's a shiny distraction. It's the next turn you want to take, on the left at the old, carved wooden sign for Camp Mitchell. The road's paved now, a godsend after years of beating up the underside of your vehicle on the once washed-out gravel drive. You're deep in the woods on a windy path just big enough for one and a quarter vehicles at any given time. Even if you've never been there, you should just be starting to feel like you've made it home. The trees fall back, the drive circles a flag pole and drops you off at a stone visitor's building, and you can't help but ignore the front door as you walk any direction ahead. Because, you see, the building doesn't matter. You are drawn to the same thing thousands of people before have been drawn to. You are drawn to the edge, the lip of the cliff where ancient stones jut strongly into the air and turkey buzzards float thermals at eye-level. The building itself hangs over the edge, and you wonder just how far out a Wile E. Coyote could run before gravity got the best of him. No joke, your odds of seeing a roadrunner on that cliff are pretty high. Camp Mitchell stretches the length of this section of cliff with cabins, the dining hall, retreat buildings, and even the gloriously simple, open-air chapel, built right up to the edge. Even the ache in your back from the long drive disappears while you stare at this glorious wonder, and maybe, just maybe you begin to feel something you haven't felt in ages. A closeness, a thinness, a receptivity to whatever it is God has to show you while you're here. Or whatever it is God's been trying to show you for years.

I know it took us a while to get here, but I want us to understand just how powerful it is to find that sacredness at the end of a long journey. When the Hebrew people left Egypt and began their 40-year slog to the Promised Land, they knew that pain and they knew that reward. Climbing mountains and crossing rivers, they walked with God. Moses split the waters so they might escape Egypt. Joshua split the waters so they might find their way home. And Elijah split the waters on his own way home. Mountains and bodies of water both occupy a special place in scripture. They are boundaries, literal, physical boundaries, but in that they take on another meaning. Rivers separate land on one side from land on another, and the writers of scripture often take that as an analogy for the border between our world and the sacred. Mountains do the same. There's the land we stand on at the very top and the air one step farther out. But it also works vertically. You're as high as you can go, as close to the heavens as you could get. You could reach up and touch the cloud God sits on just as easily as you could reach out and touch a turkey buzzard floating just above. And because they are boundaries between our world and the sacred, amazing things happen there. Moses takes God's people into freedom, Moses enters into the covenant with God, Joshua takes them into sovereignty and gives them a place to call home. When Jesus begins his ministry, he goes to water, God's Spirit descends like a dove, and he crosses into the beginning of his miraculous journey to the cross. And on his final day, Elijah crosses the Jordan with his apprentice, crosses that boundary into the sacred, and gets taken up while Elisha watches in awe and fear and sadness.

We cross the boundary, we stand at its edge and wonder, frozen by our awe, maybe a little afraid of the power of water and gravity but also drawn to it. It's a glimpse of what standing before God godself must feel like. Wonder and awe and a deep respect for a power beyond our own. By the time we see Jesus climbing up the mountain with a few disciples, we ought to be good and primed for something extraordinary to happen. We know crossing into a sacred boundary will bring this kind of story, but even still, we're surprised when the story unfolds. Jesus made dazzlingly white, not all that different from the visage of Moses so blindingly white that his

people couldn't look at him. In the icons of this moment, Jesus floats with feet just barely off the ground, as though he's been pulled higher into that boundary still. And he's joined by those two great boundary crossers of old, Moses, who never made it to the Promised Land himself, and Elijah, the man who never died. Two of the greatest that ever lived on his right and on his left, like members of the man in the middle's court. Jesus, joined by them, but greater than both. And from the clouds themselves, a voice rings clear "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." We heard nearly the same words at the other boundary when Jesus rose from his baptism in the River Jordan. From river bottom to mountaintop, we hear the same thing. No matter where you stand, This is God's son. Listen to him.

Now, I will say, I've never once seen a man glow and never once heard the clouds speak. But I've stood at river's edge, I've praised God as I've crossed the Mississippi, and I've prayed for safety as the Arkansas broke its banks. I've never walked on water without sinking, but I've had those same waters trickle through my hair as the church promised to uphold me in the promises I made to God. And I've never taken that faithful step off a cliff's edge nor have I touched a buzzard in flight. But I've watched with wonder as their effortless mid-flight adjustments took them far into a world I can't reach. And I've felt my heart race as the lip of a cliff came closer than my clumsy feet expected. I've stood on those borders, and y'all, while nothing I've been through would be exciting enough for the pages of scripture, I know I've felt the surge of something sacred in those places. For me, more so on the mountaintop, but I've got a river story or two.

Look, I know there are mountains up here. I know there's beauty, too, and some of it, God help me, beauty to rival Arkansas's. But to tell the story of God's people and God's people's encounters with God's sacred borders, I needed to take you on a journey long enough to make your back ache and your mind weary. I needed you to cross some boundaries, get on the other side of Virginia, cross a river into sacred space, climb a mountain, encounter danger and fear and our concerning past. I needed to take you to my thin place so you could begin to know your own. Maybe you already know them. Maybe you've known them for ages by now. But maybe you never had a name for them before. And maybe you do now. The name for them is sacred boundary, thin place, holy ground. It's where you meet God. It's where you stand in awe. You find yourself speechless. The overwhelming sacredness hushes your mind but hastens your heart. It's there we meet grief. It's there we meet wonder. It's there we meet God's Son, and it's there we listen to him.