

## 2 Kings 2:1-12/Mark 9:2-9

Our text calls it a whirlwind. We know it as a tornado. Raw power. Destructive beyond comprehension. Walking through the rubble left behind in its wake can render one speechless. But there are stories which we have heard that tell an opposite tale. People who have lived through a tornado; who have witnessed incredible things. An older couple, in one instance, who were sitting in their chairs out on their porch. This was in Iowa. The whirlwind lifting them high in the air and setting them back down again gently, unharmed, still in their chairs.

People have been, at times, transported across long distances. Some incurring injuries in the process; others only jolted by the shock of it all. But have you ever heard of a tornado taking someone, not just across the miles, but across time?

We heard the story today. Elijah was taken up into heaven by a whirlwind, Elisha looking on; chariots and horses of fire coming between the two of them. The last words we read are these: *“And (Elisha) saw him no more.”* Was this the end of Elijah? So it would seem. But our Gospel text tells a different tale. For on the Mt. of Transfiguration we see Elijah standing with Moses, both of them talking with Jesus. This is some nine hundred years later. Incredible! Elijah is taken up into heaven by the whirlwind, transported through time, unharmed, now seen not by Elisha, but by Peter, James, and John on the holy mountain, and he is there with Jesus.

The texts before us are comforting for those of us who have lost loved ones, or will. We can relate to the words that are spoken about Elisha: *“And he saw him no more.”* Elijah was his dear friend. Even more, he was Elisha’s mentor, his spiritual father, his teacher and earthly master. As the two of them walked from Gilgal, to Bethel, to Jericho, to the Jordan, Elisha clung to him. *“You need to stay here,”* Elijah kept telling him. But Elisha’s answer was always the same: *“I will not leave you!”* And he didn’t. He stayed with his master, his dear friend. Nothing, not even Elijah’s urging, could keep Elisha away.

And so with you. I have watched you stay near your loved ones as the time of their departure approached. You clung to them as Elisha clung to Elijah. And if you could not physically be with them, you were near to them in your heart and in your prayers for them.

But then these words came: *“And he saw him no more.”* Death is separation. It comes between us and our loved ones. And therefore death is ugly. It is our enemy, for thus the Bible describes it. It is the whirlwind, the tornado that we do not like to see coming. For when the whirlwind of death comes and goes, it leaves sorrow behind in its wake.

But picture now, with me, death in the way that it separated Elisha from Elijah. A whirlwind taking Elijah, yes, but also this - chariots of fire and horses of fire. What are these? Are these not God’s angels? They come, we’re told, to take God’s people into heaven. These beautiful angels come riding on chariots of fire. They come with the whirlwind. And yes, this means separation. But what a glorious separation! For they turn the raw, destructive power of the whirlwind into the gentle vessel - the chariot that whisks the believer into heaven.

Elisha was given the privilege of seeing these chariots and horses of fire. But this is rare. Normally it is not this way. Years after my dad died, my mom told me the way it happened. She

was sitting at his side as he lay in his hospital bed, holding his hand. And then suddenly and firmly he removed her hand from his, and he died. The chariots and horses of fire came. They separated the two of them. She did not see them as Elisha did. But they were there, for she saw him no more.

You have not seen them either. But they were there also for you, separating you from your loved one. Yet what a glorious separation this is! For the angels come with the whirlwind of death to take God's dear Christian into heaven.

And though death separates us from our loved ones, it does not separate us from Jesus. Nothing, says St. Paul in Romans 8, can separate us from Him, not even the whirlwind of death. In fact, it only serves to bring our dear ones to Him. The Mt. of Transfiguration is a picture of this. There is Jesus in all His glory, and Elijah is with Him. Separated from Elisha centuries before, but now with Christ. This is a foretaste of what is coming to us.

Our Gospel text has Moses and Elijah there with Jesus on the holy mountain. But in truth, you and I, my friends, can put our loved ones there; there with Moses and Elijah; there with Jesus. The whirlwind of death took them from us, but it transported them from time into eternity to be forever with the Lord.

In three days we begin the climb up to Mt. Calvary...the mountain of death. For there looms suffering and the cross. There our Lord hung, separated from His heavenly Father for your sake, for He was bearing your sin and mine on the accursed tree.

This climb through Lent is a slow six-week journey. One that calls for humility on our part; that calls us to a life of repentance. For unless we repent of our sinful ways, we have no part in what Jesus did there on the cross for us. And surely this journey through Lent is not one we can undertake unless we know what lies on the other side.

This is why today we are privileged to have before us the Transfiguration Gospel, where we are given a peek at the other side of Calvary. We stand with Elisha watching in sorrow as our loved one departs, but we also stand with Peter, James, and John on the holy mountain, and see by faith our loved one with Jesus.

This is our hope. God does not leave us without promise. For He is a merciful God, showing pity toward those of us who suffer; forgiving the sins of those for whom Christ died...and this is you, my friend; and filling with hope those who are hopeless.

Those whom we see no more are there on that holy mountain with Jesus. And that holy mountain is here before us in the Sacrament. Here is our glorious Lord with all His saints. We do not see our loved ones who died in Christ, for the chariots and horses of fire are keeping our eyes from seeing them. We live by faith, my friends, not by sight.

And so we journey on, through Lent, through life, until those chariots and horses come for us. And on that day our loved ones will see us no more because we will be there on that holy mountain, standing like Moses and Elijah, with Jesus. Amen.