

I Wish I Hadn't Seen That
2 Kings 2: 1-12 | Mark 9: 2-9
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February 14, 2021

I've been reading a novel called *Missionaries* by the National Book Award winning author Phil Klay. The book shows how four people from different places around the world living very different lives and fighting very different wars in the Middle East and South America are brought into devastating contact with each other by modern technology and global politics. I promise not to give you a book report about this. I only mention it because I had such mixed feelings about some scenes in the novel. The author is a Marine Corps veteran who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. I've read there is a paradox in modern warfare. Technology like missiles and drones put distance between the action itself and the decision makers in command. This makes it easy for targets to be dehumanized and it renders the experience of war very impersonal even to those most intimately involved. Aside from those technical advances, it's hard for the public to remember that its fighting a war if the fighting is on someone else's land. So Phil Klay writes with vivid, I would even say repulsive detail, to convey the consequences of war to an American public that is largely unbothered by our government's habitual engagement in military conflict. I won't describe the scenes. I will just say that reading this, I couldn't stand to watch what I was seeing but neither could I look away.

We all know what it feels like to watch as what you're seeing has a certain hold on you. It might have something to do with fear, to be frozen, like a child who keeps seeing illusions of figures in the dark when the lights have been turned out. Just close your eyes and go to sleep, the parent wants to say, but the child knows she's got to stay watchful and alert in case any monsters come out from under the bed. Watching not because we like what we see but because it's too dangerous to turn away explains much of our collective experience recently. The advice we give to children is not so easy to take ourselves. If we had just turned it off or closed our eyes recent calamities might have been handled quite differently.

This is sort of the experience of Elisha, the prophet, watching with his chin on the floor as his elder, Elijah, is swooped up into the whirlwind. He can't stop looking because this event will change his life and the collective life of his people forever. He is heartsick with worry about the future. As Elijah's chariot disappears into the clouds he rends his garments in pain. He picks up the mantle Elijah left for him and returns to his people who are equally perplexed. They cannot believe what they saw. Literally, they are in disbelief. So powerful is their denial that Elijah is actually gone that they insist the cloud that took him away must have dropped him just over the horizon. "Please, we have fifty strong men...it may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley." Like in the Wizard of Oz, they reason the whirlwind must have set that house down somewhere. But this is no fantasy film: the book of Kings may have a narrative and a voice and an agenda, but it is a primary source historical document. We're reading about people who are trying to make sense of the events that they record. We saw the whole thing. In fact we watched with rapt attention. But what we saw was so baffling we're not so sure now that we really saw what we thought we saw.

This of course is the Old Testament version of a story that famously turns up again in all three of the synoptic gospels. "Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and Jesus was transfigured before them." The New Testament draws heavily on the older tradition of the Hebrew Bible. The story draws heavily on our memories of Moses on the mountaintop, another

sight that bewildered all the witnesses. Mark draws heavily on the tradition from the book of Kings, even says Elijah himself was present at the transfiguration of Jesus. Aside from the characters, the allusions are strong: the fire and light, the bright white robe, the cloud, the whirlwind, the voice from heaven. What's different is that Peter and James and John nearly miss the whole show. Like Elisha in the Old Testament version, they were terrified and confused. But Luke says that Jesus kept nudging them to stay awake. Mark's narrative is sparser with detail. What he suggests is not that they were asleep but that they blinked and they missed it.

The events described are so dramatic that we must be wondering how they could help but pay attention. Who could possibly fall asleep in Jurassic Park? But I guess zoning out is a coping mechanism, too, isn't it? Even things that scare us we can treat as so commonplace we hardly notice them anymore. I think that's why Phil Klay has written such a horrifying book about war in the 21st Century.

For $\frac{2}{3}$ of my life my country has been involved in wars that have hardly touched my life. I think a lot about 9/11, how I watched it on television with rapt attention, like Elisha and his people wrestling with their denial, knowing it would affect my life and transform my world. Yet over time my senses have been dulled and most days I have no way of noticing violence it has extended.

It makes me think of that bumper sticker I see sometimes, or that meme that pops up on social media. "If you're not angry, you aren't paying attention!" it says. That feels convicting to me. There is so much suffering throughout the world and even just around me that I make a daily habit of compartmentalizing away so that I can function. I feel bad about pushing it away sometimes. I feel some guilt that all my privilege protects me from a lot of pain. And yet...it's also true that there is a lot of pain in my story that others know nothing about. And yet...it's also true that it's not possible to live in outrage all the time.

So I do believe that God sometimes gives us an Elisha moment that will hold our attention. Maybe God boggles our minds because there is something humbling that we need to see. Surely there are also moments when the love of Christ reaches into our experience to wake us up. Maybe then we are left with some disbelief. Maybe we are seized with fear. Maybe we are carrying some anger. Cannot each of these things be held with love?