

**From Turmoil into Transformation**  
**2 Kings 2:1-14**  
**Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**3rd Sunday in Pentecost**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**June 26, 2022**

Right now is our once a year Annual Conference meeting. The message from the bishop pointed out that we're living in a very turbulent time, turbulent by any measure you want to put on it, be it national, or in the church, or in our community, or global, or environmental, or all manner of justice concerns. In all of it, the job remains the same, the mission of the church remains the same, my job remains the same: to love the church, and to lead the church.

I try to embrace my task like a teacher, where I love, but I also encourage—to encourage growth as strongly as I can without making people feel the need to disengage. Sometimes that is a tightrope walk. And of course, growth is something that we all need in different ways, myself included. This struck me because today more or less makes it one year that I've been here. I have spent a lot of that time trying to get to know all of you as well as I can, and whenever possible as individuals one-on-one, creating opportunities also for you to get to know me. That takes time, and we're not done yet, but we're making progress. My prayer is that you are getting a sense that I care care about each of you. I care about this church. I care about our shared denomination. I'm really trying my best here, and to do my best requires sincerity and vulnerability, because you can't engage with people in a meaningful way without them engaging back with you, which requires vulnerability on your part. If you don't have the sincerity, well, people can smell a fake a mile away, right? So I can't do anything without being open to change myself.

We decided to have a watch party here this past Thursday for opening worship. Fully half the people who came were from Watertown United Methodist Church, making that the first jointly held worship experience of our new cooperative ministry arrangement. There were only four of us, and on Friday morning just two of us watching the bishop's episcopal remarks. When there are four of you and not 40 of you, there is more of a chance to get to know each other. I would say that was time well spent. I do hope that some of you watched from home. It was really, really good. So good that I've talked with more than one person about maybe just putting it up here (on the sanctuary screen) after worship one of these weeks to give everyone an opportunity.

This year's theme is "Restoration Revival: Resetting for the Journey," which packs a lot in. If I was to try to put that into more plain everyday language I would call it "leadership in turbulent times." The scripture that our bishop kept coming back to was from 1 Peter 5, saying "and after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power, forever and ever, Amen."

Right now, our denomination is suffering. Our annual conference is suffering—which is not a surprise because our congregations are suffering. The bishop had plenty to say—he always does—but the through line was quite clear, and it was an elaboration on something that he shared with clergy more than a month ago. We have fallen into a mindset of being transactional, and we must take on a mindset of being transformational. Because in a transactional relationship, the focus is on what can you do for me, and what can I do for you. A quid pro quo. In a transformational structure, we look to something larger than the individual. We look to something aspirational.

Transactional structures are about quarterly results, about making sure that you don't take advantage of me, about me not coming out of this as a chump or a

loser. Transformational strategies are not just focused on the future, but on creating a future that's worth the effort. In transformational leadership, the focus is on the self-interest of those who are being led, not of the leader, and of looking beyond the present moment. Often there's an element of sacrifice, and occasionally there is a tremendous amount of sacrifice.

He had a lot to say, but that's a good start. I can't recommend his remarks highly enough. They also give the most complete information to date that I've heard from him about our impending cooperative parish structure, meaning that a lot of it suddenly became very relevant to the Woodbury United Methodist Church. It's a big challenge to do what he challenged us to do, because if you want the church to go backwards, well, we've been there so we know what that looks like. If you want the church to stay the same, you just keep doing what you're doing and that'll take care of itself. But the future is unwritten. If we're aiming at the future, we're not even sure what we're aiming at, right?

Where is God in all of this? As we ponder the future, do we even see God as part of these decisions, or are all these all business decisions like any other? That is a serious question. What has God done for us lately? Invoking God as we make decisions about the future of the church sure sounds good, but it can be hard to believe that a God we don't see will be an integral part of a business plan that is plainly frightening to contemplate, and a balance sheet that either works or it doesn't.

Those words sound harsh, but they have been the rhythm of the entire history of the church. They are the rhythm of the Bible, and they are for sure the rhythm of the Old Testament. If you think about the Books of Moses, it's comical, because God does something awe inspiring, and then the next verse begins with the people forgetting all about it, complaining to Moses they were better off in slavery! Of course, the Old Testament was written over a very long period of time, so when we read it, this is ridiculous, because God has just appeared as a pillar of fire! What

more do you want?! How could you possibly doubt God after witnessing that?! But you let some time go by, and that's the rhythm for them as it can be for us.

So what do we do? What do I do? And all of that brings us to today's scripture passage. Elijah is among the very greatest of the great of the Hebrew prophets, but his day is past and he knows it, He's done, and with the little time he has left he spends it with his disciple Elisha, and they go on a little journey together.

You may have noticed that the words that were just read were slightly different than the words highlighted in your bulletin. Those of you who have been here for a while know that I almost never title my sermons. One of the reasons for that is because writing a sermon is a challenge, and by the time you get to the end of it, it's not that surprising if what you see is different from what you thought you would see when you started. The message I want to share with you today hinges on the part that in the lectionary is elided. When they decide to go off on a little journey, first they go to Bethel, and then to Jericho, and then finally to the Jordan. In the dividing of the water with his cloak, Elijah walks in the steps of Moses and of Joshua as those who have parted waters miraculously—but let's go back to that beginning part because the lectionary skips right over it. I want to start at Bethel.

The Hebrew name Bethel means “house of God” and it refers to a city and then later a major sanctuary that was established for the northern kingdom of Israel. The first mention of Bethel in the Bible is in connection with Abram—not yet Abraham—who built an altar to God there. Eventually the ark of the covenant was kept at Bethel. This was where people went to seek God when they were in trouble. That seemed important to me because by Elijah bringing his disciple to Bethel, you are reminded of the mighty acts of God all the way back to covenant with Abram, a covenant that still continues. Of sanctuary, and seeking sanctuary in your God. Of the ark of the covenant.

They proceed to Jericho, best known as the location of an astonishing miracle God performed. Jericho, the first city conquered by Israel after crossing the Jordan and coming to the promised land. The first city to fall in the conquest of Canaan. The whole city a tithe to God, who commanded that they take no spoils of war. Joshua commanded it and it was a tithe to God for giving you victory. By Elijah bringing his disciple to Jericho, we are reminded of God's delivery of God's people in circumstances that are impossible for humans to accomplish on their own, in this case very particularly done so that there can be no question that it is to God alone that they owe their victory.

Then they proceed to the Jordan, which separated the wandering years in the wilderness from the promised land. The Jordan, which parted at Joshua's command when the priests brought the ark of the covenant into the water. The Jordan, associated with both Elijah, who lived there for a while, and later on Elisha, who told Naaman the Syrian that's where he was to bathe to cure his leprosy (one of my favorite Old Testament stories). By going to the Jordan with his disciple, Elijah is reminding him of a dividing line between what came before and what came after, a reminder of God fulfilling all of God's promises even after years of wandering in the desert. A reminder for someone who may have at the time felt a little like he was wandering in the desert himself, with the impending loss of his master. And of course you can't think of the water parting miraculously without thinking of Egypt and the Exodus and Moses parting the waters at a time of existential danger for the Hebrews. This was a pivotal event of their identity.

In studying this it hit me—this is a God's greatest hits tour! Each place they visit, they are reminded of a story of the Hebrew people and their relationship with God, and God's covenant with them, and that in times of often great danger God had always, always, always been faithful. God had always kept God's promises.

Do you feel God's presence in your life right now? Maybe you do, maybe you don't, it's fine if you don't. Very famously, after the death of Mother Teresa

her journals revealed that as a teenager she experienced an intense personal experience of God that changed her life completely. In her journals we learned that she never experienced that again. She longed for it her entire life, begged for it, but that one experience of God was enough to carry her through her entire life.

Have you ever felt God's presence? Have you ever been convinced that you have seen the hand of God at work? I bet most of you have. I charge you this day to remember that, especially if you're not sure what you see happening right now. Remember what you have seen! Remember God's work in your own life, in the lives of those you have loved, in the life of this community, in the life of our Methodist denomination. Is God real? If you've had any of those experiences at all I am quite sure that at that time God felt unquestioningly real to you. But sometimes we forget. Sometimes we need reminders. Sometimes we need to see a journey through God's faithfulness in our own lives, or in the lives of those we love, or in the church, or in the world, so that we can see it just a little bit more clearly.

I started off this message by mentioning all the challenges that we face. Those those challenges are real. The threats are real, and I remind you that so is God. I remind you to look back at your own spiritual autobiography. Every one of you is in this room for a reason. I am here for a reason. When I am given a job that seems to threaten to overwhelm me, I ground myself in what God has done. As the saying goes, I don't think God has brought me this far to let go right now. I bet all of you can say that, too.

As a church we face obstacles that are very real, and by church I mean as a congregation, us right here. I can't help but look around at so much that's happening in the world, particularly some things that some of you really don't want me to talk about, which are also the things that some of you very much want me to

talk about<sup>1</sup>. I look at any of those things or especially all of them together and I believe God has a lot of work for us to do, because the work of this church is clearly far from complete. In fact I would say the work of this church is urgent.

Regarding that verse from 1 Peter, I would suggest that perhaps we too have suffered for a few years, all of us, because even if you yourself are doing great, you might concede that the time of pandemic has caused this congregation to suffer. We've suffered when people have refused to engage in difficult conversations, preferring to separate to avoid having difficult conversations. Remember, our plan is to not be transactional, where if I don't get what I want then I don't need you. What we want is to be transformational, and in fact I would say we must embrace being transformational because a transactional model has almost killed us.

A transformational structure means that we engage in things maybe we don't really want to do, but we do it anyway because we know that it is for the good of the church. We know that that is what will give us a future that is worth working towards, a future worth the heartache.

“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you.”

Do you believe that? If you do believe that, does God do those things as a thank you gift, or does God say “Okay, now you're ready. Now you're ready for something that is going to require power and strength, and so I strengthen you and I empower you. Now get busy.”

I think we have work to do saving souls, mending lives, restoring hope in a future that is worth striving for, even if that means working towards something that

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was preached two days after the US Supreme Court struck down the constitutional right to a legal abortion.

isn't exactly what we want for ourselves but it is something that's critical for those who are still seeking after God. Or those who will come after us and need that that place to be ready, that hope to be ready. If that's what that means, then it might be the most important task we could ever have. To God be the power forever and ever. Amen.