

Kate Cudlipp: Chariots of Fire

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

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Chariots of Fire

The Hebrew scripture reading for today tells of Elisha asking for a double share of Elijah's spirit. (When I first read this passage, I stumbled over Elisha's request for a "double share". This seemed the height of presumption to me until I read a commentary that explained that the request refers to the legal provision that a firstborn son must receive a double portion of an inheritance. Elisha thus asks to have the status of Elijah's firstborn and to inherit more of his spirit than any other prophetic heirs do. He is not requesting more of God's spirit than Elijah had, but only a fraction of it.)

Elijah responds, "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." A chariot of fire and fiery horses appear, and Elisha sees Elijah ascend into heaven. In the verses that follow today's lectionary passage, Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle, uses it to part the waters of the Jordan in an Exodus-like fashion, and moves back into Israelite society, to carry on Elijah's prophetic work.

One commentator describes what happened to Elisha by saying: "A crack between temporality and eternity opens to Elisha's sight." Elisha experiences another world – God's realm – breaking into this world. Elijah knew that if Elisha could not see that inbreaking, he would not be able to assume God's power and he could not become God's emissary. But Elisha did

see the chariot of fire.

The gospel lesson is also about the inbreaking of God's realm. Jesus takes three disciples to the mountain so that they might experience another realm of reality. There they see Jesus' clothes "become dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them" and they see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. Not surprisingly, the disciples are terrified, and rather than sit with their terror to see what they might learn, they, or at least Peter, jumps to bring events back into a familiar context. He offers to build tents or dwellings, like the tents associated with the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles (or Booths) for Jesus, Elijah and Moses to dwell in. Peter wants to stop the action, to freeze the moment of God's revelation rather than get on the spiritual roller coaster that participating in transfiguration entails.

God doesn't let Peter get away with his worldly response-one that is all too recognizable to us. God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." And what has Jesus been telling Peter and the disciples? In the passage just preceding today's scripture, Jesus warns his disciples of the suffering and death to come. Peter tries to get Jesus to see things differently-the scripture says Peter "rebuked" Jesus, perhaps urging him to "go along" in order to "get along." Jesus rebukes Peter. Now, six days later, God says to Peter, "Listen to him."

Jesus and the voice of God invite the disciples to undergo a transfiguration, themselves, to behold the chariots of fire, pick up the mantle, and go with Jesus to his final earthly destiny. Even after the transfiguration, the disciples can't or won't "get it." Not yet. Not fully. (In the gospel of Mark Jesus' followers are portrayed as particularly dense and slow on the uptake; they come off a little better in Matthew and Luke.) In spite of being dense and at times afraid, however, they still perceive that their lives-their truest lives-are somehow inextricably bound to the life and teachings of this

person, Jesus.

They keep walking with him; keep seeing signs and hearing him talk of the Kingdom of God. At the time of the crucifixion, they are not yet ready to be transformed. They have been preparing, however, and were being prepared to be changed by yet another intrusion by God-the unimaginable event of the resurrection. This time they are ready. They respond forcefully, not tentatively. This time they see the chariots and pick up the mantle.

Do any of you, like me, long for a transfiguring event that will change you forever and make it easier to follow Christ? I sometimes think if only I could see a fiery chariot or clothes whiter than any on earth or have Paul's conversion experience, then I could be more Christlike. In my heart I know it wouldn't work that way: first, because such dramatic experiences are few and far between, and more importantly, there's no guarantee that even a life-changing event would change my life permanently. The powers and principalities of this world are mighty, always present, always pulling me their way, away from the "Dream of God," as one writer, Verna Dozier, describes the alternative reality that is the kingdom of God.

Is the promise of transfiguration a mirage? Does transfiguration – God's inbreaking – occur only in dramatic moments that are granted to those who are somehow holier or more faithful than I, "better" people?

I believe not. I believe God breaks into this world in myriad ways through the agency of countless people. I believe that if we can recognize this we will no longer be blinded by "the god of this world" as Paul refers to the forces of evil in today's epistle, and we will be able to participate in bringing the kingdom of God into being.

How do we strip away the veil that blocks our recognition of

God's power and presence?

- We do it by training ourselves to perceive in the actions of others God's kingdom breaking into this world, often in undramatic ways.
- We do it by training ourselves to hear God's invitations to us to participate in the breakthrough of the kingdom.
- And we do it finally, after seeing the ways God works through others and hearing God's invitation to us, by finding ourselves empowered to act on God's behalf in our daily lives.

I can't help but picture, at this point, Diane Willkens' fabric board hanging over the altar, with slits that allowed us to pull the brilliantly colored cloths through the gray covering – God's realm breaking into this world!

Where do we get this training to be God's agents, God's emissaries in the world? In large part we get that training in community. In community we help each other see and name transfiguring moments:

- In recent weeks, Deborah's sermon on the [Voice of God](#) reminded us that we hear God in the common as well as the extraordinary places of our lives;
- The Artists' Mission Group, last Sunday and at other times, help us see and hear God presence right in our very midst;
- Jesse and Mollie in early January called us to a silence long enough to let us hear God's resonance within ourselves.

In spiritual direction relationships, in mission groups, and in informal settings where two or three of us are gathered together, we also help each other glimpse the inbreaking of God's kingdom and respond to the invitations to be part of a transfiguration.

In techno-language, we are part of a feedback loop. As we

perceive and respond God's transforming activity, we are transfigured and add to the colors that others may perceive and join. They, in turn, make it possible for us to see more opportunities to bring God's realm into the present age, and so it goes.

Transfiguration, like its close relative, conversion-is not a one-time event. We must keep being transfigured, and we have to keep on doing the work of transforming the world.

It is not only individuals that are transfigured and, in turn, help transform others, it is also communities. Seekers Church is being actively invited to undergo transfiguration. I firmly believe that the invitation is God's. Transfiguration is not the process of becoming completely other; it is seeing and understanding the self in a new way, a way that unleashes God's power and the possibility for new responses to the powers of this world.

The process of transfiguration is more complicated for a community than for an individual. Rather than one of us looking at our response to an opportunity or challenge in our life, nearly 100 of us, including our young people, must look collectively at how to respond to challenge and opportunity.

The steps are the same for a community as for an individual:

- First, we recognize that God is breaking into our world;
- Then we need to see where we are being invited to participate in the inbreaking;
- And finally, we have to choose to respond to one or more of those invitations.

I hope we can name places where we have glimpsed the inbreaking of God's kingdom. I think of the surprising things our very young Seekers, like Andrew Holmes, have said about God. I think about our pre-adolescents starting the HTH venture to Lafayette Square and about individual Seekers who speak truth to power in the public policy arena. I think about

FLOC and other missions of our parent, the Church of the Saviour. Do others come to you mind's eye?

As for the second step, Seekers has already identified places of invitation to participate in God's ongoing transformation:

- Finding new ways to raise our children so they can challenge "the gods of this world"; identifying more closely with a neighborhood or with missions in the city;
- Offering art more consciously and widely as a way to help people experience God's presence;
- Forging more links to, and initiatives with, other non-traditional Christian communities.

These invitations, and perhaps others yet to be named, awaken us to places we perceive God awaiting our response for breakthrough to occur.

What are next steps? To act! There are concrete steps we can take to move more deeply into our transfiguration:

- Attend the congregational meeting on Tuesday night, if possible. There, listen to the voices of others in the community and take the time to listen to promptings within yourself regarding a vision of where and/or how Seekers might be transfigured. Speak your truth.
- Go out to places that others have identified. Can you see any of them being transformed by Seekers' presence or Seekers being transfigured by that new setting?
- "Try on" spaces you find yourself in, whether they are available as new space for Seekers or not, to see what Seekers would look like if we were in such a space and location. Who would our lives be intersecting with? Who might be coming toward us? Whom might we be drawn toward?
- Look at the Seekers budget, again or for the first time. Ask questions if something is not clear. See where we

put our money. Is transfiguration dwelling within those figures for you? Do you sense transfiguration in your own life as you consider what portion of your financial resources you will commit to Seekers? What might you want to propose that would help Seekers become a transforming community in the world?

- And if you are brand new-or almost new-at Seekers, ask yourself if you see something of God's work going on here. Are you being invited to join in? What do you need from any of us and what news can you bring us about what you see in this community?

Transfiguration: a one-time event in the New Testament, an ongoing call to those who call ourselves Christians. We are called to believe that God's kingdom is always present, always poised to break through the veil held up by the "gods of this world" and that we have the responsibility-and the power, as God's children-to see the signs of that other world and join forces.

Can you see the chariots of fire?