

Sermon – “Unbroken”

Transfiguration Sunday, February 15, 2015

Scripture Readings – II Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9

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Our first scripture is II Kings, 2:1-12. Our reading focuses on Elijah’s last day on earth, as he passes the torch of his ministry to Elisha. We notice the bond that Elijah and Elisha share after spending 10 years together. Elijah wants to spare Elisha the pain of his departure. Elisha is determined to remain with Elijah until the end, although he won’t discuss it with the groups of prophets they encounter on their journey from Gilgal to Bethel, Jericho and the Jordan River. In our reading we hear Elisha request a “double portion” of God’s spirit, breath, “ruah” which Elijah had received. Elisha realizes that he will need great spiritual resources to fulfill his new role. Hear, now, God’s Holy Word.

*1 Now when the LORD was about to take Eli'jah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Eli'jah and Eli'sha were on their way from Gilgal. 2 And Eli'jah said to Eli'sha, "Tarry here, I pray you; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Eli'sha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. 3 And the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Eli'sha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?" And he said, "Yes, I know it; hold your peace." 4 Eli'jah said to him, "Eli'sha, tarry here, I pray you; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. 5 The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Eli'sha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know it; hold your peace." 6 Then Eli'jah said to him, "Tarry here, I pray you; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. 7 Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8 Then Eli'jah took his mantle, and rolled it up, and struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground. 9 When they had crossed, Eli'jah said to Eli'sha, "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." And Eli'sha said, "I pray you, let me inherit a double share of your spirit." 10 And he said, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if you do not see me, it shall not be so." 11 And as they still went on and talked, behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Eli'jah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. 12 And Eli'sha saw it and he cried, "My father, my father! the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and rent them in two pieces. Amen.*

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we gather to remember the mystery of God’s presence in our midst and the importance of passing the mantle of ministry. Our second scripture reading is Mark 9:2-9. Three disciples join Jesus on a mountaintop experience and witness an encounter that will forever change the way they see the world. We began Epiphany with a voice from “on high” speaking at Jesus’ baptism and now a voice speaks again at Jesus’ transfiguration to close Epiphany. The voice first inaugurated the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and now the voice asks us to LISTEN before we enter Lent. We are called to listen with our hearts, eyes and minds to what happens next in Jesus’ ministry as Jesus prepares to pass on the torch and walks through his own valley of suffering. Hear now God’s word.

*2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

The title of the sermon “Unbroken”

*The Text: When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.’ Elisha said, ‘Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.’” II Kings 2:9*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, empower us with the strength of your spirit. Breathe into us your ruah, your breath that we may rise to the call to carry the mantle of your light into the world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

*Unbroken!* Some of us have read the book. Some of us have seen the movie. *Unbroken* is a biography of World War II hero Louis Zamperini, a former Olympic track star who survived a plane crash in the Pacific, spent 47 days drifting on a raft, and then persevered more than two and a half years as prisoner in three brutal Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. Thought to be lost at sea in 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt sent a personal note of condolence to his parents. Laura Hillenbrand wrote the book, which was published in 2010 and Angelina Jolie produced and directed the movie, which premiered Christmas Day 2014, six months following his death at the age of 97.

Laura Hillenbrand also wrote the 2001 best-selling novel *Seabiscuit* based on the depression era race horse. When she approached Louie about writing his story she recalled a comment he made. “I’ll be an easier subject than *Seabiscuit*,” Louie said, “because I can talk.” And talk he did, following some seventy-five interviews over seven years. Laura wrote in her acknowledgements, “In opening his world to me, Louie could not have been more gracious.” Ironically, one of the definitions of unbroken is an untamed horse... one who has never been harnessed... This is the kind of spirit Louis Zamperini embodied.

My father, who read the book which I gave him for Father’s Day in 2011, identified with Louie’s childhood experience of being bullied as a young Italian-American boy. Louie responded to bullying like so many young boys do. He became troubled and a troublemaker, disappointing his parents and having run-ins with the police. Thankfully, Louie’s life changed the day his older brother Peter saw how fast he could run when he was caught looking up women’s dresses from under bleachers during a track meet. Peter decides to train him and for the first time in his life, Louie receives positive recognition for who he was as a runner.

Louie puts his infamous unbroken spirit and determination into his running and becomes an accomplished distance runner, qualifying for the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Germany where he does surprisingly well. Zamperini comes in 8th and sets a record for speed in the final lap of the 5000 metre race, running it in 56 seconds.

Instead of going to the 1940 Olympics, which never took place, no doubt an unspeakable disappointment, Louie finds himself conquering unthinkable feats in human survival and resilience during World War II. He comes out a hero; renown for the strength of his human spirit; however, he is not unbroken. This is where the movie ends and this is where the story of his redemption begins.

In the years that follow his heroic welcome home and his marriage to Cynthia Applewhite in 1946, Louie is tormented by post-traumatic stress and an obsession with murdering the man who tormented him in the Japanese prison camp, the man known as the Bird. He became isolated, a heavy drinker and driven by revenge and personal rage. *During the war, the Bird would not let go of Louie, now it was Louie who could not let go of the Bird. (Unbroken, pg. 366)*

Cynthia, who is afraid of his erratic, unpredictable behavior for good reason, eventually leaves him, returning for a short time in September of 1949 to file for divorce. This was the same month Billy

Graham came to town and set up a tent in a vacant parking lot on the corner of Washington Boulevard and Hill Street, beginning a three-week campaign to bring Los Angeles to Christ. Although it was not easy to convince Louie, he agreed to join Cynthia at a tent meeting after her own life was transformed.

*When Graham appeared, Louie was surprised. He'd expected the sort of frothy, holy-rolling charlatan that he'd seen preaching when he was a boy. What he saw instead was a brisk, neatly groomed man two years younger than himself... (Unbroken, pg. 372)*

When Graham spoke about the drowning men and women in the tent that evening lost on the sea of life... Louie's thoughts drifted to the 47 days he survived on a raft in the Pacific Ocean... and when Graham spoke of looking into the heavens of the beautiful California sky and seeing the footprints of God in the stars, the same God who is not too busy running the whole universe to count the hairs on our heads and to see a sparrow when it falls... Louie remembered the same stars over his head as he drifted on that Pacific, dying of thirst, surrounded by sharks and the promise he had thrown to the heavens, a promise he had allowed himself to forget until just this instant. If you will save me, I will serve you forever. And then, standing under a circus tent on a clear night in downtown Los Angeles, Louie felt rain falling. It was the last flashback he would have. Louie turned toward Graham. He felt supremely alive and began walking. This is it, Graham said. "God has spoken to you. You come on."

When Cynthia and Louie entered their apartment that night, Louie went straight to the liquor cabinet and emptied the contents of the bottles in the kitchen sink. In the morning he woke feeling cleansed. For the first time in five years, the Bird hadn't come into his dreams. Louie dug out the Bible that had been issued to him by the air corps and mailed home to his mother when he was believed dead. He walked to Barnesdall Park, found a spot under a tree, sat down, and began reading. Resting in the shade and the stillness, Louie felt profound peace. When he thought of his history, what resonated with him now was not all that he had suffered but the divine love that had intervened to save him. He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that the Bird had striven to make of him. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he was a new creation. Softly, he wept. (Unbroken pg. 374-376)

Nearly fifty years later, Louis Zamperini ran a leg of the Olympic Torch relay for the Winter Olympic Games in Nagano, Japan. The site for his leg of the relay was not far from one of the POW camps where he was held during the war by the men he had the power to forgive. Some say that Louie Zamperini's spirit outshines the Olympic Flame that he has carried five times.

If Louie were worshiping with us today at Westminster as he regularly did at his congregation, the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, he would tell us that it was not his unbroken human spirit which outshines the Olympic Flame. He would say it is the Spirit of God, the ruah, the breath that gives each of us life; the spirit which Elisha received twofold; a request that was granted because Elisha had some of Louie's spirit. "When he started something, he never quit!" He had the courage to ask and he had the perseverance to stay the course.

Louie would say it is the light of Christ's face which outshines the Olympic Flame; the grace of a God who empowers us with the love of Christ. As we come down from the mountain of the transfiguration in a world that is broken and longs for healing, may we be torchbearers in the unbroken legacy of faith. In our affirmation of the human spirit, may we never forget the broken places in our lives and the God who entered into our suffering to make us whole. Amen.