

February 11, 2024 @ Trinity Bixby  
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel  
II Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9

It will surprise few of you, I think, that Pastor Elana and I enjoy learning the origins of words. Often, when we're driving a distance in the car together, we'll realize we don't know where a word came from, and we'll look it up. Everything from simple words to \$100 theological words – it's fascinating to learn their origins. One of the words that is both simple and theological is the word God. I'm grateful to Elana for realizing that it's an unusual word, despite its common use in our lives. We'll come around to the English word – but first, a digression into other languages. In Greek, the general word for God, *theos*, derives from a word for “put” or “place” – the Divine is the one who “puts things together.” In Latin, the word *deus*, though sounding a bit like the Greek word, is actually derived from a word that means “sky” – the supposed location of the realm of the divine. In Hebrew, the word *Elohim* is interesting – it's technically plural, and references lower-case gods and idols as well as being used for upper-case God, singular. It seems to derive from a word that meant god in many Semitic languages – and may share a root with *olam*, meaning “eternity.” If that's so, then *Elohim* may mean “the Eternal.”

That takes us back to English. Our word God is from a Germanic root, which indicates it's been a part of English for a long time. Ultimately, our word God comes from a word that means “to invoke, to call, to swear.” God is the one by whom you swear oaths. Ironically, we tend not to swear oaths of any sort in the modern world – instead, our signature is considered binding, and we do not require the swearing of oaths by the Divine in most circumstances. There are exceptions – courtrooms, national citizenship and taking of office, and marriage licenses and ceremonies.

Actually, let's talk about marriage licenses for a moment. It's entirely possible that most states don't require a divine oath for the license, but when Elana and I were married in North Carolina, we were required to swear on a Bible that our intension was to be married. The clerk was aghast, however, when I deigned to actually open the Bible we were given. In all the years she had served as a clerk, no

one else had bothered to open the book! It turned out to be a King James Version – no surprises there – printed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. As far as I can tell, the clerk was shocked that her authority was challenged – she gave me a book, and told me it was a Bible, so my opening it to check was interpreted as an insult.

The practice of swearing by the Divine is ancient, of course. It was a way of promising honesty by lifting up your precious soul as collateral. In II Kings, Elijah takes a final journey through the countryside of Israel, to cross the Jordan river and be lifted into Heaven, and Elisha swears by the Living Lord and by Elijah himself that Elisha will accompany him. Three times, Elijah tries to send Elisha off, and three times Elisha swears by the Living Lord and by Elijah that he will stay at his side. And so, Elisha goes the distance. He accompanies Elijah, even walking on dry land across the Jordan after Elijah strikes it with his cloak. After all the company of prophets are left behind, Elijah and Elisha walk together. Finally, Elijah says to Elisha, “What do you want, before I’m taken away?” And Elisha says, “Let me receive a double portion of your Spirit.” Literally, a double mouthful of your breath. A double-portion was the traditional inheritance given to the firstborn, the primary heir. To ask for the inheritance of Elijah’s Spirit – that’s a big ask. And Elijah replies, “If you see me as I am taken from you, you will receive it.”

Elisha has sworn, three times, to accompany Elijah to the end. And now, Elijah agrees to have Elisha inherit – to effectively adopt him as his son, and to offer a double portion of breath, of spirit. And so, Elisha sees Elijah lifted into heaven, and, despite his grief, he immediately performs the same miracle of parting the Jordan, when he walks back to the company of prophets. He has proven himself as Elijah’s successor – and Elijah becomes one of only two people in the Hebrew Bible to be taken directly to heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Now, repeating an oath three times became part of Jewish practice as a result of this story. Traditionally, when a potential convert to Judaism asks to join in membership, they are asked on three separate occasions if they’re sure they want to

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<sup>1</sup> The other being Enoch. (Gen 5:24)

convert – in fact, they’re asked directly to not convert. Only by swearing by God three times that they wish to convert – and following other traditions and rituals, too – are they able to convert.<sup>2</sup>

We see swearing of oaths – and the three-fold swearing - in the New Testament, too. Peter swears, falsely, three times that he does not know Jesus of Nazareth<sup>3</sup> – and then, during the resurrection appearance, Jesus asks Peter to swear three times that he loves him.<sup>4</sup> In the beginning of the Book of Romans, Paul swears by God, saying, “For God is my witness... that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers.”<sup>5</sup> Paul’s swearing by God is especially interesting, as he uses the phrase, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you...” Keeping in mind that Paul is the earliest Christian writer, it’s important to note that his understanding of Christ is worthy of thanks and of swearing by, right from the beginning. He considers Christ divine, and shares that understanding with everyone he writes letters to – and presumably, talks with. To Paul, and to the church generally, Jesus is the Living Lord – God-with-us.

And that takes us to the story of the transfiguration on the mountaintop. Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus up the mountain, and witness a conversation between Elijah, Moses, and Jesus. Peter offers to build them all wooden shelters – a place to stay, now that these three beings, touched by the Divine, are here on earth. Peter’s saying, “Live here! I’ll make you a place to stay!” But then, a cloud covers up the shining ones, and a voice speaks to the three disciples – “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!”

God speaks, and the disciples do their best to hear and follow. In many ways, it’s like a reverse of an oath – instead of swearing by the Living Lord, God shows love for Jesus, and encourages the disciples to listen to him. The Living Lord isn’t a

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<sup>2</sup> Referenced by Jason Byassee in Working Preacher (2024)-  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-2-kings-21-12-6>

<sup>3</sup> Matt 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, Luke 22:54-62, John 18:15-27

<sup>4</sup> John 21:15-17

<sup>5</sup> Rom 1:8-10

passive being, off in the sky or eternity – but present, right now, in the midst of the people. The Living Lord is to be listened to – not sworn by or at. And what does the Living Lord say to the people? “Follow me.” Love God. Love one another. And, once Jesus returns to heaven, he promises that his Spirit, his breath, his portion will remain with the disciples and with us.<sup>6</sup>

In the richness of these stories, we find a tapestry woven with threads of continuity and divine inheritance. Just as Elisha received a double portion of Elijah's spirit, so too do we inherit the Spirit of God through Jesus Christ. The promise of the Transfiguration, where God declares Jesus as the beloved Son, echoes through the ages, reminding us of our connection to the divine and our call to follow in the footsteps of Christ. As we depart from this moment of reflection, may we carry with us the assurance that God's love remains steadfast, that Christ's presence sustains us, and that the Spirit empowers us to live out the gospel in our daily lives. May we go forth, confident in the promise that God is with us always, guiding us, strengthening us, and leading us into abundant life. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> John 14:12, 16-17