

**Giant Leaps**, a sermon in response to 2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9 by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, February 11, 2024 (Transfiguration B).

July 20, 1969. Apollo 11. As astronaut Michael Collins remains in lunar orbit in the Command Module, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin settle onto the surface of the moon in the Lunar Module called *Eagle*. When the hatch opens – Armstrong makes his way down the ladder. – And, as he becomes the first human being to set foot on the moon, – he utters this unforgettable phrase: “That’s one small step for [a] man, one **GIANT LEAP** for mankind.”  
+++ It was a defining moment for humanity, which had gazed at the moon for tens of thousands of years *at the very least*. Its mysteries had long been the subject of philosophers, scientists, artists, and dreamers. And now... one of us – actually *two* of us – had actually been there... bounded around on the surface... kicked up the dust... planted a flag... and left their prints behind. +++ Things would never be the same again. +++ Another astronaut, Jim Lovell (who is still known best for commanding Apollo 13 the following year and reporting, “Houston, we have a problem”), Jim Lovell famously said about Neil Armstrong’s breakthrough moment..., “From now on ... we live in a world where man has walked on the moon.” ... “From now on” ... everything is different.

**GIANT LEAPS.** The Declaration of Independence... the fall of the Berlin Wall... September 11, 2001... Women’s Suffrage... the invention of the wheel... the Stock Market crash of 1929... the arrival of Europeans in the Americas... the development of language... the Protestant Reformation... the invention of the printing press... the creation of the internet... colonialism... the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk... +++ +++ These are just some... just a few... of the many Giant Leaps throughout history. +++ +++ And none of them came easily. +++ Looking back, we might think of some Giant Leaps as “good” and others “bad,” but they all came with a certain amount of blood, sweat, and tears. +++ Each one of them evoked fear and second thoughts, either by the ones who made it happen – or by whomever it happened TO. +++ And then there was no going back. Everything had changed forever. **Giant Leaps.**

But it’s not just the big-ticket historical events. We all have these Giant Leaps in our own lives, too, don’t we? Moments that changed everything else that came afterwards. ... What are some of *your* giant leaps? +++ I’ll go first: for me, I think about the day I got married,... when Linda and I had our children,... graduations,... that kind of thing. +++ Now, these things count... they definitely count... But, at the same time, the ones I mentioned are universal ones – they are the typical milestones. +++ Today, I want to dig a little deeper than that. Which Giant Leaps are just yours? Days that changed everything... for you? Those are harder.... Speaking for myself again – I’d say, the day I walked away from university work to pursue a corporate career – that was a big one. Now, I look back at with both positive and negative feelings. ... Then there was another, about 20 years later... as I was bouncing around in the back of a pick-up truck in Haiti... +++ – It was the day the Holy Spirit called me back away from that corporate world and into Christian ministry. +++ I even have a memento of *that* Giant Leap. That very day, I bought this bracelet, in Haiti, probably for about \$1, and put it on. Then I sealed the knot with superglue. I’ve been wearing it ever since – for about 12 years now. There are others – but those are two important ones for me... +++ ... I wonder what some of yours might be. Maybe you opened up to someone and told them something about yourself... Maybe it’s a time when you forgave – or you were forgiven... Maybe you, or a loved one, were the victim of an accident... or a crime... Maybe you just decided you weren’t going to take it anymore. +++ These Giant Leaps of yours – as life changing as they were at the time, I’ll bet their impact hung around; and ended up changing your life in ways far beyond what you could have foreseen at the time... They dig deeper than you expect... They surprise you... They can even terrify you. +++ And part of the memory, of course, is what YOU did next – what path you followed... after your giant leap.

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This all sets the table for us to grapple with today’s scripture readings – themselves both surprising and terrifying. They come at Elisha – and at Peter, James, and John – when they’re not ready... – And they are each overwhelmed in that moment. +++ There’s a mantle, or cloak, that miraculously parts the Jordan River... A chariot and horses of fire appearing out of nowhere to carry Elijah off to heaven in a mighty whirlwind... Overpoweringly radiant, shining clothing... The unexpected appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain with Jesus... And most overwhelming of all – the true glory of Christ..., revealed. +++ These events expose the true magnitude and glory

of Elijah, Moses, and Jesus – with Elijah ascending into heaven without first tasting death – and Jesus transfigured, revealing his divinity – and hinting that soon he will rise from the dead. +++ But, if you notice, the way these narratives are written – instead of focusing our attention squarely on Elijah and Jesus, they put us into the shoes of Elisha and the disciples. – Our attention is really directed at what’s happening to them... >> We feel... their trepidation. – We sense... their panic. – We understand it. – We share it. ... Everything they think they know about their world is changing forever. +++ And what do they do? In the midst of these dramatic revelations – when they see one of those Giant Leaps opening before them, they are terrified... they hesitate – and they try to slow down the inevitable. +++ And we understand that, too. Giant Leaps are scary. – They’re risky. Change is hard! +++ I think that’s why we’re drawn to see what’s happening with Elisha and the disciples more than with their mentors and teachers: It’s to help us see that fear of change is natural. – It’s human. +++ **BUT**, we are called to take those risks anyway. – We are called to let go of our fear (or at least manage it), – and to take that next Giant Leap that God has prepared for us.

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So, let’s look at each of these narratives to see what they tell us about standing at the edge of life-altering change. Years ago, Elisha had been out plowing his father’s fields when this great prophet, Elijah, was directed by God to come out into the mud with him, to wrap his mantle around Elisha, and call him to serve the Lord. ... Just like Jesus’ disciples, Elisha had dropped everything and followed. Since then, he has shadowed closely behind Elijah. – He’s become a disciple, soaking up all that Elijah has to teach. All the while, Elisha is developing his own prophetic voice – but he has grown so reliant on Elijah that he can’t imagine stepping out from under his master’s shadow. +++ But now the time has come for Elijah to be taken up to heaven by a whirlwind. Elijah knows it... Elisha knows it... and the whole company of prophets who were with them knows it. +++ But Elisha just can’t let go. +++ Elijah tries to make the break for him: “Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha’s response: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So, they travel together to Bethel... The other prophets in Bethel try to step in to help Elisha make the break. “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” ... And how does he respond? “Yes, I know; keep silent.” ... In other words, “Shut up – I don’t want to think about it!” +++ The same thing happens again when Elijah goes on to Jericho. The prophets there try to help him – but Elisha still isn’t listening. +++ He knows what Elijah’s departure will mean and he’s not ready to face it: Elisha is going to have to stand on his own... He’ll be the one other prophets will look to for leadership and guidance... He’ll be the one who has to deal with the king. ... Without Elijah, can he trust his own prophetic voice? ... Will he have the wisdom to help others understand God’s word? +++ +++ Elisha’s reaction is understandable, isn’t it? We know how it feels, don’t we? We get so used to relying on certain things and doing things in certain ways. +++ In her commentary on this passage, Debie Thomas writes that we have “one way of knowing God, one way of practicing our vocations, one way of relating to our families, one way of ‘doing’ church, faith, and religion. By the time Elijah’s ascension draws near, his student Elisha has become totally reliant on him. Elisha understands both his God and his purpose through his mentor. He can’t bear the thought of having that safety net ripped away. Who will God become in Elijah’s absence? Who will Elisha become, if he is forced to stop into spiritual adulthood? If he is forced to evolve?

“In this story – as in our lives,” Thomas writes, “there is no way to avoid the thresholds that God appoints. The chariots come, ...the whirlwind descends, ...and Elijah leaves his bereft student behind, [alone by the banks of the Jordan River. And for the first time, Elisha faces the reality] that spiritual maturity requires crossing ...from certainty... to faith, ...from light... to shadow, ...from power ...to vulnerability. Elisha saw God’s glory [that day], that’s for sure. But he also saw a point of no return, and his response was neither gratitude nor joy. [Instead], he tore his clothes and grieved... +++ As quickly as the divine vision comes, it departs. +++ There is no afterglow, no surge of prophetic authority or knowledge as Elisha lies grieving in the dust. +++ Only silence. +++ Only loss. +++ Only questions.” +++ So, where is Elisha’s **GIANT LEAP**? Is it in the great vision of the fiery horses and chariot? Is it in seeing God’s glory with his own eyes? Is it in steadfastly refusing to leave his master’s side until the bitter end? ... No, I don’t think it’s in any of those things. Elisha’s Giant Leap is what comes next: “He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, ‘Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?’ When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went

over.” +++ Elisha had done everything he could to avoid this moment – but it had arrived anyway. He is weary – he is unsteady – he feels used-up. But he turns back – and makes his own lonely crossing of the Jordan River. The Jordan – where Jacob had crossed alone after wrestling with the angel all night long. Where Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land, parting the waters as Elijah had just done – as Moses had done at the Red Sea. Elisha crosses the Jordan – at the edge of the great Wilderness, – where Jesus would be baptized centuries later. +++ Elisha’s Giant Leap is in his resolve to become who the Lord called him to be ... even when it scares him. Even when it doesn’t match his own plans. – His Giant Leap is in his newfound strength to break through dependence and fear, which were holding him back. – It’s in following the Lord to find his next life.

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As we turn to Mark’s transfiguration narrative, the first thing that draws our attention is the dramatic scene of bright light and the unexpected arrival of Moses and Elijah – just as the actual fiery ascension of Elijah drew our attention in the Old Testament reading. And for good reason – this short but intense event vividly reveals Christ’s true nature – his divinity for the first time. – It points to his coming death and resurrection – and it places him as the heir to both the Law and the Prophets, indeed as the living fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures as Moses and Elijah fade away and leave Jesus alone upon the mountain.. +++ +++ Yet, once again, instead of keeping our focus on how important this moment is for Jesus, Mark draws us more to what’s happening with Peter, James, and John: – their terror – and their awkward attempts to deal with this Giant Leap that has opened before them with no warning at all. +++ You know, by now, Jesus’ disciples have been following him around for years, just as Elisha had shadowed Elijah for so long. I’ll bet they think they know about all there is to know about Jesus. They think they’ve got his repertoire down pretty well by now. His stories, his miraculous healing, his sermons. They know what makes Jesus laugh – they know his facial expressions. With Jesus they are safe. With Jesus they are comfortable. Life is predictable. +++ So, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him, high up on that mountain by themselves, they’re just glad he chose them to go with him that day, instead of the whole gang. They have no idea that everything they think they know is, literally, about to be put into a brand new light.

But then – **BOOM** – everything changes. Without warning, Jesus is “transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” +++ “Transfigured.” That’s a strange word, isn’t it – it’s a word we don’t use much. The Greek word it’s translated from is “*metamorpho*,” which is related to our word “metamorphosis.” I think that has a more visceral meaning to us. – We use it to describe a caterpillar’s change into a butterfly. Metamorphosis. It’s more than just a visual change, – it reveals things that had been completely hidden from you. +++ This is still Jesus, but yet, somehow, so much more than the Jesus they know. Suddenly, their friend – their teacher – their master – is not so familiar to them anymore. +++ Like Elisha, they are thrust into a Giant Leap where everything is changing around them. They can’t stop the change – it’s so... much... bigger than they are – and they are terrified. +++ +++ Suddenly, I’ll bet they didn’t feel so lucky to be the ones Jesus took with him up the mountain that day. +++ Peter especially can’t get his arms around what’s happening. He’s probably thinking, “OK, *that new out-of-this-world look for Jesus just happened*. – It’s still Jesus but it’s crazy-scary at the same time... Elijah and Moses are here with him. – What the heck is going to happen next? I’ve gotta do something to keep this from getting any more out of control.” +++ So, Peter tries to make it comfortable again – he tries to make it familiar: “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” +++ “OK, this is cool, really, I’m... ah... good with it. But let’s put up some tents now, slow things down, and chill out for a while.” +++ Peter is actually trying to tame something that is eternally untamable – like trying to tame a hurricane with a hair dryer. It’s all he can come up with. Mark tells us, “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.” +++

One thing that Peter, James, and John do understand, though, is that their lives as disciples of Jesus have just taken a Giant Leap. +++ +++ You know, back when they saw Jesus for the first time and had dropped their nets to follow him, they might have thought that would be the last Giant Leap they’d have to make. – But they have been learning – as we learn if we’re paying attention... – They are learning that’s just not how it works with Jesus. Jesus always challenges you to take another path, – to grow, – to risk. He calls you to have a living, evolving, faith that’s open to new possibilities. +++ >>> Jesus is always calling you to that next Giant Leap. +++ ... +++ So now, as they come down the mountain with Jesus, there’s a whole new path laid before them. It’s not a path of

comfortable teaching, and healing. It's not a path that leads from town to dusty town. It's a path to death and resurrection – a path they have never contemplated before. A path they aren't ready to understand. +++ But **that's** the path that's laid before them. Their Lord is calling them to follow him there. +++ +++ And so, they go. +++  
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My friends, today, **we** stand on the edge of our Lenten Journey, – a journey that is anything but comfortable and predictable. It's a time for personal examination, – a time for penance. **It's a time that tests our willingness to be changed forever by Jesus Christ.** +++ +++ Like Elisha following his master beyond the Jordan, – like Peter, James, and John following Jesus up the mountain, – Lent is a time for **you** to follow new paths, as well. It's a time to look inward **with courage.** – A time to see God's Spirit helping you in your weakness, – interceding on your behalf... with sighs... too deep... for words. +++

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We spent some time a few minutes ago thinking about the Giant Leaps our lives have seen so far. Now, for your **Lenten** Journey, I'd like you to consider where God's Spirit might be nudging you **now.** What **leaps** are **you** being called to take? ... Maybe it's terrifying to think about – as Peter and Elisha were terrified when they saw lay before **them.** +++ ... +++ Maybe there's some grief you've been putting off that's holding you prisoner until you plow through it. +++ Maybe there's a relationship that's ready to grow – or one that needs to end. +++ Maybe you're burned by guilt you can't let go of, even though Christ forgave it long ago. +++ These are not easy paths. It's no wonder Peter and Elisha tried to sidestep them. They are hard to travel. They lead to **crucifixion** – +++ \\\ they lead to **death** – sharing the death of Jesus Christ. +++ That's where this Lenten Journey **always** leads: Ash Wednesday's resignation that we are dust, – Palm Sunday's arrival into Jesus' last week, – Maundy Thursday's commandment to humble love, washing feet, and our Savior's arrest, – Good Friday's horror of the cross. +++ **That's** where this Lenten Journey leads us. – **But it's the only route to Easter.** +++ +++ **Find** your growing edges, – **find** your pain, – **find** your opportunities, – **find** the path the Lord has set before you. Walk with them these 40 days to the edge of death. – Then give them over to resurrection. +++ Find new life. +++ It's a giant leap – and you'll never be the same again.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.