

Special Effects
Sermon by Kathy Speas
2Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9
March 2, 2003 SF Swedenborgian Church

Pretty cool special effects, eh? A whirlwind of fiery chariots and flaming horses, somebody suddenly glows with this incredible other-worldly dazzling light. Talk about Industrial Light and Magic – it's ancient and archetypal! Pixar is nothing new, folks. The florid images throughout the Bible preserve an ancient witness to our deep sense of transcendent wonder and mystery. We line up to pay \$8 a seat to experience what seemed to happen spontaneously for ancient people – a moment of amazement that blows us away, and makes the world look different when we come out of the theater (or down the mountain). Call it escapist entertainment if you like, but people are driven to seek this shocking sense of awe that humans seem to need so deeply on a soul level. Outside of the movies, we are all about explaining, predicting and controlling things, not being inspired or transformed by them. Biblical scholars seek diligently to figure out what really happened. Who cares what really happened, I care about what's true, and sometimes it's beyond words. Here's what we'd say about Elijah's death today: "Elijah the Tishbite died today in a fire. Police are still investigating the extent of the damage and the cause of the blaze, which took the lives of an unknown number of horses and caused some vehicular damage. Elisha will take over as CEO of Prophets R Us." And who would be inspired by that thousands of years later?

What happened to our sense of awe? The experiences that make us say "Holy Smoke!" (Notice that we don't say "Mundane Toledo!" or "Earthly Cow!" – we always say "Holy" something.) Two things have happened to awe in our lives. One, we've explained it away. And for good reason. Direct encounters with the divine are scary. You notice that the staff of Prophets R Us stands "at some distance" from the action, and Elijah tries to tell his sidekick "This may be too much for you." Peter, James, and John are terrified. Terrified. Not a little anxious, kind of nervous, angst-ridden, but terrified. It's wired into us to construct meaning, to make sense of the world. So one, we've explained wonder away so that we can live with a minimal amount of terror, and two, we just don't know what to do with it. Elisha begs to come along with Elijah, but he doesn't stand there in inspired wisdom when Elijah goes up, leaving him with the great job he wanted, he howls in grief and tears his clothes. And good old Peter. This bizarre thing happens, his friend is transfigured into a kind of light

never before seen by human eye, and his first reaction is get the duct tape and the hammers. Don't just stand there, do something.

These passages are not just about fear and how to respond to it, they are about how awe and wonder can lift us out of our world of words and reasons, and give us a perspective that is even bigger than fear, a vision that is more expansive than anything that can happen to us. These are images of those rare but powerful flashes like lightning on a dark night, that illuminate everything just for an instant, but stick with us as we go back to groping in the dark. They speak to us of experiences we can't explain, much less predict or control. These stories do not instruct, they inspire. Swedenborg writes about the Transfiguration as an image of how God's love and truth became human in the world. This was not God acting through an emissary, and it was not about getting a glimpse into a supernatural world, it is God, right here, right now. What are those flashes, those instants of recognition of God? It's more than just the sunsets that change our mood after a stressful day – that just reminds us of the rarified transcendence that may only come once in a lifetime, or not even come to us directly. Here's an image that reminds me of such holiness. About a day or so before the space shuttle Columbia was supposed to land, before anyone encountered that Transfiguration, a reporter asked the astronauts to describe the most awe-inspiring moment, the biggest "wow" of the journey. (Isn't it heartening that someone even asked that question, that they did not ask about the greatest success or the biggest commercial potential?) Astronaut Kalpana Chawla described looking out of the window of the spacecraft and seeing earth, but also seeing her reflection in the window, with the earth reflected in each of her eyes. Wow. Can we put that story in the Bible?

So, what do we do with all of this sense of the holy? This is the biggest, scariest question I know right now. The sermon prep books and Swedenborg all talk about the importance of coming down off the mountain and taking up our cross, No Cross No Crown, they say, Jesus got crucified, where's your Christian courage, what are you going to do? Good question. If I had any clue, don't you think I would be out doing it right now? I've never met anyone who said "You know, I have this clear task to do, this mission to accomplish, this path to follow so I can manifest God's kingdom on earth, but I'm really not up to the task." But I sure have heard this a lot, and I'm saying it myself: "I simply don't know what to do, about – fill in the blank – the war, the homeless, my job, a career I've put decades into, my kids' future, poverty, pollution – I just do not, for the life of me, know what to do." I see a lot of Christian courage around me. We've got Christian courage, alright, we

just don't know how to make the most of it. Jesus and the disciples came off of the mountain, and at least there were roads to follow. Elisha heads back to Jericho anointed as a leader. I feel like I've come off of the mountain and all I can see is endless, directionless ocean. Nowhere to stand, and no compass.

Maybe this is where the transcendence part comes in. It looks to me like I am powerless, but maybe it doesn't look like that to God. Just by being people of faith in something grander and more wondrous than ourselves, each of us has touched and been touched by that mystery in a different way, and each of us is continually unfolding our role in ways that we're not even aware of, but we are doing it. Maybe it's not a matter of what we do, but what we let happen through us. We are being led and guided and shaped in ways that we cannot imagine, and there's the awe, the wonder, the mystery. God is the cause, we live the very special effect.

I'd like to close with a quote from astronaut Rusty Schweickart, who went into space to explore the universe, but found that the universe was exploring him:

"And then you look back on the time you were outside and on those few moments that you could take, because a camera malfunctioned, to think about what was happening. And you recall staring out there at the spectacle that went before your eyes, because now you're no longer inside something with a window, looking out at a picture. You're really out there, going 17,000 miles per hour, ripping through space in a vacuum. And there's not a sound. There's a silence the depth of which you've never experienced before, and that silence contrasts so markedly with the scenery you're seeing and with the speed at which you are rushing. And you think about what you're experiencing and why. Do you deserve this, this fantastic experience? Have you earned this in some way? Are you separated out to be touched by God, to have some special experience that others cannot have? And you know the answer is no. You know very well at that moment, and it comes to you so powerfully, that you're the sensing element for man. You look down and see the surface of that globe, and you are up here as the sensing element, that point out on the end, and that's a humbling feeling. It's a feeling that says you have responsibility. It's not for yourself. The eye that doesn't see doesn't do justice to the body. And somehow you recognize that you're a piece of this total life. And you're out there on that forefront and you have to bring it back somehow. And that tells you something about your relationship with this thing that we call life. So that's a change. That's something new. And when you come back there's a difference in that world now. There's a difference in that relationship between you and that planet and all those other

forms of life on that planet, because you've had that kind of experience. It's a difference, and it's so precious." Amen.