Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah. Ahab son of Omri was king over Israel for twenty-two years. He ruled from Samaria. Ahab son of Omri did even more open evil before God than anyone yet—a new champion in evil! It wasn’t enough for him to copy the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat; no, he went all out, first by marrying Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and then by serving and worshiping the god Baal. He built a temple for Baal in Samaria, and then furnished it with an altar for Baal. Worse, he went on and built a shrine to the sacred whore Asherah. He made the God of Israel angrier than all the previous kings of Israel put together.

34 It was under Ahab’s rule that Hiel of Bethel refortified Jericho, but at a terrible cost: He ritually sacrificed his firstborn son Abiram at the laying of the foundation, and his youngest son Segub at the setting up of the gates. This is exactly what Joshua son of Nun said would happen.¹

The Promised Land, the Holy Land has been desecrated. The Holy People have fallen into the pattern of the wicked who lived there before them. Called by God as a Holy Priesthood to bring the blessing of the Lord to the peoples of the earth, the descendants of Abraham have become a curse instead. In their story, we see the utter sinfulness of sin. It contaminates the society. It leads to perversion. And it ultimately results in human killing one another as a form of worship. It is the reversal of Abraham’s gift and the beginning of the end of all things.

In Genesis, when humanity descends into the chaos of destruction and world-ending activities, the Lord sends a flood to destroy the world. He saves Noah and his family who will rebuild the world. The family of God, in the land God has set aside as the beginning of a new creation in Israel is returning yet again to the wicked ways that lead to the end of all things.

Like the pagan nations before them, Israel has been judged and found wanting. The Lord declares war on the land and the people in the person of Elijah. Elijah the Tishbite, from among the settlers of Gilead, confronted Ahab: “As surely as God lives, the God of Israel before whom I stand in obedient service, the next years are going to see a total drought—not a drop of dew or rain unless I say otherwise.”²

The next time Elijah stands before King Ahab it is three years later. He comes to rain down fire on the false kingdom of Baal. “The moment Ahab saw Elijah he said, “So it’s you, old troublemaker!” “It’s not I who has caused trouble in Israel,” said Elijah, “but you and your government—you’ve dumped God’s ways and commands and run off after the local gods, the Baals. Here’s what I want you to do: Assemble everyone in Israel at Mount Carmel. And make sure that the special pets of Jezebel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of the local gods, the Baals, and the four hundred prophets of the whore goddess Asherah, are there.”³
Elijah calls down fire from heaven, defeating and mocking the Baal in the name of the Lord. He then kills the prophets of Baal. But he knows this will not change the heart of the real ruler of Israel: Jezebel.

He leaves and runs to the very place where Moses met with the Lord before coming into the land. He tells the Lord the situation that he has seen firsthand: Elijah said it again, “I’ve been working my heart out for God, the God-of-the-Angel-Armies, because the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I’m the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me.”

The Lord of the Angel Armies gives Elijah war plans: we must not mistake what is happening on the Holy Mountain. The Lord is preparing to declare war on Israel, but before He does Elijah and Elisha will raise up a remnant community who will preserve the word of the Lord during the dark days ahead. This remnant community will impact both Israel and Judah, and voices will come out of this community who continue to remind the people of the original call of God: voices like Amos, Isaiah, Josiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

God raises up Elijah in the darkest days of Israel’s history to prepare the way and prepare a people for judgment but also for the eventual restoration of the nation. Elijah will become a sign of hope for the people. When he appears, the kingdom of God is coming to defeat the powers of evil.

When John the Baptist appears proclaiming, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” People begin saying that Elijah has returned. Then after John the Baptist is killed, they begin saying that Jesus is Elijah.

Jesus leads Peter, James and John up a mountain, and he is transfigured before their eyes. Elijah and Moses appear on the mountain talking with Jesus. Both men play a role in fulfilling the commission on Abraham to bring the blessing of God to all families of the earth. This blessing, this restoration, this overcoming of sin and death would also mean judgment on the wickedness and evil that has cursed the people of the world.

Today’s Gospel reading focuses particularly on Elijah. As they come down the mountain, the disciples are quizzing Jesus. “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

When the disciples see Elijah on the mountain with Jesus, they see the sign that many in Israel have waited for. This is the sign that the day of the Lord is coming. In their world, Elijah comes and then God shows up. When they see Elijah, they question for Jesus. “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?”
The first thing Jesus says reinforces the expectations of Elijah, “Elijah does come first to restore all things.” When Elijah appears, expect that the day of judgment has come: evil will be rooted out and the Holy Land will finally be restored to be the blessing.

Then Jesus says two puzzling things: And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? 13 But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

Let’s consider the last statement. Elijah has come. Who is Elijah? Matthew makes it clear that John the Baptist is the sign of Elijah. Jesus is saying, the one who had to come before God shows up has come. What did they do to him? They killed him. And the same thing is going to happen to the Son of Man.

If we can get this picture in our imaginations, we can see why the transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah is so significant. First, we back up slightly to Mark 8. Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” 29 And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” 30 And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.6

The answers John the Baptist, Elijah, the prophets, and finally the Messiah all point to the fulfillment of God’s promise. They expect Jesus to usher in a new age of God’s Kingdom. But then, unexpectedly, Jesus tells them that he must suffer many things, be rejected and finally be killed. If he is the one to usher in God’s Kingdom and the bring the blessing of God to the world, how can this be?

Then Jesus tells them not only he will suffer and die, but that they must also take up their cross and follow him. Then we have the ascension up the mountain, transfiguration, the appearance of Elijah and Moses, and the descent with questions about Elijah where Jesus reiterates the suffering that is coming.

With all those images in your mind, let me try to connect a few dots. Elijah is a sign of God’s war on wickedness and the evil that has cursed Israel and humanity. His ministry is a sign of the end of Israel and Judah, but is it is also a promise of a restoration to come as he heals, raises people from the dead, and serves pockets of faithful Jews.

He becomes a sign of the fulfillment of God’s promise to defeat evil, restore his people and fulfill His promise. When John the Baptist appears as a voice in the wilderness, he appears as the sign of Elijah. God is fulfilling his long-awaited promise. Jesus is that revealing of that promise. He has come as a conquering King, the Messiah, the warrior who will defeat evil and restore the land. The transfiguration reveals an overwhelming glimpse of the glory in Jesus and the glory that will shine in all people and creation when he has finished the war.
But now the twist. He will bring judgment upon evil even as He enters into that same judgment.

Why do the demons cry out when Jesus comes near? Because He has come to declare war on this world and the spirit of the world knows it. Thus the Pharisees and Sadducees resenting to the spirit of the world, resist Jesus, threaten Jesus and want to kill Jesus. The Gospel story of the story of God’s war on evil. He has come to defeat the power of the evil one. The war with Pharaoh in Egypt was just a glimpse of this war. This is a war to the death. To defeat once and for all time, the power behind all the Pharaohs across all time.

This war will be won in the most unthinkable way: through defeat. The disciples cannot fathom it.

Hans Urs Von Balthasar describes the coming cross of Christ in this way,
No fighter is more divine than the one who can achieve victory through defeat. In the instant when he receives the deadly wound, his opponent falls to the ground, himself struck a final blow. For he strikes love and is thus himself struck by love. And by letting itself be struck, love proves what had to be proven: that it is indeed love. Once struck, the hate-filled opponent recognizes his boundaries and understands: behave as he pleases, nevertheless he is bounded on every side by a love that is greater than he. Everything he may fling at love—insults, indifference, contempt, scornful derision, murderous silence, demonic slander—all of it can ever but prove love’s superiority; and the black the night, the more radiant does love shine.

The Love of God cannot be defeated. The cross of Christ demonstrates this. This is why Paul can say that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. The Gospel is the story of God’s war on evil though love. Love unstoppable. Life undestructable. Evil cannot win.

Yes, the disciples of Christ will often feel the heat of this war on evil as they face opposition. Some will be killed by the powers that people. But this cannot, will not ever stop the power of God’s love that has forever defeated the powers of hell and death.

As we behold the transfiguration, we behold the hope that Christ brings to us and all creation in the way of the cross. We do not fear the evil of this world. Instead, we cling to the cross, we hide ourself in the love of God. We pray to become the very revealing of God’s love in Christ. Paul sees a glimpse of this love of God for us that is greater that all the powers and principalities, and he prays that we might know this love. So even as we behold the coming of Elijah in John the Baptist. Even as we realize God’s war on evil will not stop until death has been defeated. We realize that love has already conquered and we join in prayer with Paul:

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts
that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.


