

“LISTENING TO JESUS”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 17:1-9

(02-23-20) Transfiguration

In the church calendar we mark the end of the season of Epiphany on Transfiguration Sunday, which is today. Epiphany, you may recall, from the sermon I gave at the joint worship service at the end of the year, is a manifestation, a vision, the revelation and revealing of God as human in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

We begin Epiphany with the proclamation of the Wise Men, the Magi from the East, who name Jesus as the one born King of the Jews, and who, when they find him, kneel in worship before him, offering their best gifts, then followed by the baptism of Jesus when a voice from heaven declares, you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased. And now we bring that revealing of God as human in Christ full circle in the mountaintop vision that Matthew’s gospel records for us this morning.

The Transfiguration has always been a somewhat difficult text for many of us to understand. We need to begin where the text begins, that the account of the transfiguration begins with the events that took place 6 days earlier. Six days earlier, at a place called Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, **“Who do you say that I am?”** Peter answered, **“You are the Messiah.”** After that confession, Jesus predicts that he must suffer and be rejected, eventually to be killed. Peter rebukes Jesus for saying such things, and in return is rebuked by Jesus who says to Peter, ‘get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.’ Jesus then tells his disciples and the crowds following him that if any want to become his followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him.

So, the focus of the gospel has turned from the healings and feeding of the crowd to the question of the identity and nature of Jesus. **Who is Jesus? is the central question behind the account of the transfiguration.** And it reaches a high point, both literally and figuratively, as Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain and was transfigured before them.

The word transfiguration in the Greek, literally means “metamorphosis,” to change into a completely different appearance. The gospel tells us that on the mountain, Jesus was transfigured, that his clothes became dazzling white like nothing on earth. Then with Jesus appeared Moses and Elijah, talking with him. I don’t know how Peter knows its Moses and Elijah with Jesus. What reference would he have had to compare them to? We don’t know and, in any event, scripture has no interest in explaining it. Peter suggests that they build three dwellings, booths is what the older translations call them, to house Jesus and his guests. You really can’t blame Peter for suggesting that they provide these booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Why wouldn’t you want to preserve this monumental moment? (Israel and churches) Jesus, the one you recently confessed to be the Messiah, with Moses and Elijah, with the Law and the Prophets, it’s the best trinity he could have ever hoped for.

But how does Peter even begin to process what’s going on around him? **The operative word in this experience for the disciples is fear.** Peter and the other two disciples are overcome by fear, they are terrified. What’s happening before them is outside the realm of their experience. Jesus is transfigured. They get a glimpse of his true nature, his glory, his transcendence.

In that transcendence, in that glory, live the Law and the Prophets, Moses and Elijah, the best that Israel offers. But it overwhelms them, it confounds them, they are at a loss because what they see is so far beyond their ability to comprehend.

Do you have moments like that? Have you ever had an epiphany, a revelation of God's glory, God's transcendence, a glimpse of God's nature in such a profound, unexpected and honest way that you just know that you've been in the presence of the divine, but you could never really put words to how you felt, what you experienced? Maybe it's like a beautiful sunrise, when the red brilliance of the dawn's unfolding chases away the final grey gloom of the lingering darkness. Maybe it's that fleeting look on the face of someone in love, a new mother with her baby, **but you really can't preserve moments like that, can you?** It comes and it goes, like a bolt of lightning. And that's what happens in the transfiguration **and it's frustrating because it's so beyond us, beyond our capacity to hold on to.**

But what if we've been using the wrong sense to understand this text? For so many the transfiguration is understood as a visual event, a glimpse of the glory of Jesus. In that brilliance is contained something so profound about the divine nature, but it is elusive and quick and mysterious. If you google images for transfiguration, you'll find countless pictures of what people imagined that scene on the mountaintop to be like. A dazzling Jesus in white, surrounded by Moses and Elijah, usually with the disciples lying prostrate on the ground with their faces turned away in fear. Even the hymns for this Sunday are mostly about the visuals.

"Shine, Jesus, Shine" tends to be a familiar choice for transfiguration Sunday, but you may remember that we sang that last Sunday. **But what if it's not all about the visual, or even primarily about what we can see?** What if the sense we need to

bring to the transfiguration isn't our seeing **but our hearing?** When the disciples were overwhelmed by what was happening around them, a cloud overshadowed the brilliance of the transfigured Christ and a voice came from the cloud saying, **"This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"**

Then, it was over, just as suddenly as it began. No more light, no more Moses or Elijah, just Jesus back to normal, no pictures, no paintings, no videos or selfies or Instagram posts, just Jesus and the disciples. But the disciples had heard the voice, "this is my Son, the Beloved, **listen to him!**" The disciples no longer have the brilliance of the light of transfiguration, but they still have the one who is the light of the world **and they are commanded to listen to him.** And as they come down off the mountain, leaving behind what they can't truly comprehend, they still have with them the one who is God come to be one of us. They are told by Jesus not to speak of what they had seen, at least not yet, **but they do know they have to listen to him.**

To follow Jesus, to confess him as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, isn't primarily about mountaintop epiphanies of illuminating light, **but more faithfully, serving him and the rule of his kingdom in the valleys of common life,** listening to the one whose words and teachings are always to be our guide and encouragement. Listen to him, says the voice. Most of what I perceive these days tells me that we are a society and culture that is primarily visual in context. So much of what we take in is visual, designed to appeal and connect with our visual sense. It is said that 90% of what is transmitted to our brains is from visual input. All you have to do is click on Instagram to know that this is how our society, especially our younger generations, communicate and connect with each other. Everything is so visual and

with it being so addictive, we are constantly looking for that next visual “hit,” if you will. We need to be stimulated, or to be honest, those who want to connect with us, mostly advertisers, need us to be continually stimulated or else we might lose interest. Hearing, listening, often takes a back seat to seeing. But hearing, of course, like every one of our senses, it’s crucial to our well being. Studies tell us that there may be a connection between hearing loss and dementia. Whether hearing loss is a contributor or merely an indicator is uncertain, but one can easily imagine that with the loss of hearing can come social isolation and the decline of mental faculties. Hearing is critical to our wholeness. People often say that hearing is the last sense to go before we die. I’m not sure how much scientific proof there is of that, but many people will swear that their loved one responded to something that was said long after they stopped responding to all other stimuli. Maybe it’s the way it’s meant to be.

But there is a difference between merely hearing and listening. We hear lots of things. Our ears take in everything around us; **they are indiscriminate in what they hear. But we can choose to listen selectively.** Listening takes more effort and is more intentional. It’s amazing what people can tune out. Parents of teenagers know that for such young healthy people, teens are incredibly hard of hearing when it comes to certain things, but there are other topics which you can’t even whisper and not have them overhear it. **Maybe the takeaway for us from the transfiguration of Jesus isn't a momentary glimpse of something that we just can't easily process, but the command to listen to the one who the Beloved of God.** In the gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry, the transfiguration is the midpoint. From this moment on, Jesus begins the journey to Jerusalem and to the cross.

The Beloved of God will give his life so that we the children of God may know

eternal life. The disciples were commanded to listen to him, and we are commanded to do the same. In a world where there is so much noise, so much that would tell us what's important, what has value, what is meaningful, what we should desire, **the voice of God directs us to listen to one voice above all, the voice of God's Beloved.** Listen to him. Do we listen to Jesus, do we really?

Do we listen to Jesus or do we merely hear him? It's pretty easy to tune him out, especially when what Jesus says goes against what we want to hear, when it challenges what we already think, when it convicts us of the need for repentance and change in our lives.

If the transfiguration of Jesus tells us that he is God in the flesh, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Jesus the Messiah, the Beloved Son of God, if this glimpse of glory affirms what was said by the Wise Men, what took place at his baptism, when that same voice affirmed that God was well pleased with him,

then we have a choice to make. Will we listen to Jesus, will we be intentional about listening to his voice, to the witness of his life and his love? Seeing is easier, listening is hard work, it takes more discipline, more commitment. **Listening is the less glamorous work of discipleship, not chasing after the next shiny thing.** In our Bible study we are reading the parable of the sower and in that parable Jesus says that some of the seed that was sown falls on shallow ground, where the seed sprouts up quickly, but in the heat of the sun, it withers because the soil has no depth. There are people like that, whose faith sprouts with every new and novel thing but has no depth.

It's the kind of faith that seeks to go from one mountain top experience to the next.

But we know that life's not like that.

We know that most of life is lived in the valleys, where life can be hard, painful and unpredictable, where God can be difficult to see or experience. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent. We are entering into a time of preparation for the suffering of the cross. I suppose we don't have to, and no one will force you to observe Lent. **But I would say that the glory and joy of Easter is much more meaningful if we've lived through the wilderness with Jesus, journeyed with him through a time of careful listening and obedience.**

40 years ago, Eugene Peterson wrote a book about spiritual formation called, 'A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.' The subtitle of the book is, 'Discipleship in an Instant Society.' In it, Peterson writes, **"There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness."** We are obsessed with the immediate, the new, the quick fix. Think about how much more so it is 40 years after Peterson first wrote those words. When he wrote the book, there was no internet, no Google, no Facebook, no Instagram, no iPhones, no Netflix, so much has changed. So much of that change is rooted in the visual, in what we see. But Peterson's prescription for discipleship is for us to observe a long obedience in the same direction. **It's a prescription to listen, to reflect, to pray, to seek holiness.** As we prepare to embark on the journey of Lent, will we listen to Jesus' voice of sacrificial love, of countercultural values, of living lives of long obedience that are faithful to the direction of God's kingdom?

Will we listen to Jesus, not only hear him? Will we listen to his voice and live our lives guided by that voice? There's a big difference between hearing and listening.

You've heard people say, you might be hearing me, but you're not listening to me.

Webster's defines hearing as the "process, function, or power of perceiving sound; specifically: the special sense by which noises and tones are received as stimuli."

Listening, on the other hand, means **"to pay attention to sound; to hear something with thoughtful attention; and to give consideration."** Clinical psychologist Kevin Gilliland, PsyD, says the difference between the two is night and day. "Hearing is like collecting data," he explains. The act of hearing is rather simple and basic.

Listening, on the other hand, is three-dimensional.

The world needs disciples of Jesus who not only hear his voice, but listen to it.

We need to be followers of Jesus who will pay attention and give thoughtful consideration to what Jesus says, **who will translate our listening into the three-dimensional living of our lives.** Real listening must change how we live our lives, the values by which we order our living. When we lose our ability to listen to Jesus, we run the risk of isolation from God and what God intends for us. When we lose the ability to listen to Jesus, don't we run the risk of losing our connection to the one who gives our lives their fullest meaning and context and if we do, don't we risk living lives of diminished faculty? **Who is Jesus? That's the key question behind the transfiguration.** The way we listen to Jesus and live out what we learn will tell the world our answer to that question.

Maybe the point of transfiguration in the end isn't about the change in Jesus.

After all, Jesus is who he is, all along. But maybe the good news of transfiguration for us, for those of who will listen to Jesus, **is that by the grace of God, we can change, we can become more and more the people God desires us to be, the beloved people of God!**

Thanks be to God, Amen.

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