

Sermon for February 7, 2016 – “Listen!”

Transfiguration Sunday, Year C – Text: Luke 9:28-43

This week, on Ash Wednesday, churches everywhere will undergo a transformation of sorts as the liturgical calendar moves from the season after Epiphany to the season of Lent. Our praise-filled shouts of “Alleluia!” will give way to Lent’s solemn petition, “Lord have mercy.” Our readings will lead us down from the mountaintop where the transfigured Christ is revealed in glory...through the valley of the shadow of death...and, ultimately, to Jerusalem where the cross and tomb await.

Lent weighs heavily on us. It urges us to recall the suffering and death of our Lord. So, in many ways, we arrive at this final Sunday before Lent with a mix of anticipation and anxiety, a combination of joy and dread. It’s no accident, then, that every year on this Sunday, we hear again the story of Christ’s transfiguration on the mountaintop. Why? Because at the heart of this story we find all-too-familiar feelings: Feelings of anticipation diluted by anxiety and joy thinned by dread. Luke tells us that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to the mountaintop. Without getting our contextual bearings we may be tempted to believe that the chosen disciples happily agreed and gleefully followed Jesus without reservation. However, we must recall that just a few verses earlier in chapter nine, something very different was going on... Jesus had asked the disciples: **“Who do you say I am?”** Peter answered, **“God’s Messiah.”** Jesus then warned the disciples not to tell this to anyone. He then said, **“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law...“And he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”** **“If any want to become my followers,”** Jesus went on, **“let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”** So, as Peter, James, and John journey with Jesus to the mountaintop, they’re forced to come to grips with a horrifying truth. The truth that Jesus, their beloved friend and leader, must suffer and die! When they reach the top of the mountain, the text tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them and that Moses and Elijah appeared. As the disciples beheld their Lord they realized that they were in the very presence of God. But even in this incredible moment of divine transfiguration Peter couldn’t forget what Jesus had told them before they came to the mountain. **“Master, it is good for us to be here,”** Peter petitions **“Let us make three dwellings – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”** At some level, most of us can’t help but sympathize with Peter. Seriously, who among us would knowingly submit ourselves or our loved ones to pain and suffering? Who wouldn’t want to shelter and protect ourselves or them as much as we possibly could? Who wouldn’t want to preserve this glorious, awesome moment as a way perhaps of staving off the horror of what was coming?

Peter’s efforts to protect Jesus are undoubtedly acts of love and devotion. I think that’s absolutely true. I also think that this isn’t merely “Peter being Peter” (opening his mouth and inserting his foot) which he’s often portrayed as doing... But there’s more here. And the more I think about it, the more I get the feeling that they’re also acts couched in Peter and the disciples’ need for safety and security. They’d seen a glimpse of God’s glory in the face of Jesus and they wanted desperately to hold onto it...They want to protect it. But the moment that they try to do that, the moment they try to hold onto and protect Jesus, that’s the moment that a voice from above breaks in, proclaiming: **“This is my Son, my chosen – listen to him!”** And notice what happens next... As the disciples came down from the mountaintop, they didn’t run to the nearest town and tell the first person they saw about what they’d just witnessed. They didn’t wait until Jesus wasn’t looking to talk about it. And they didn’t take to Social Media with the news... No, Luke tells us that they **“told no one any of the things they had seen.”**

Most biblical scholars interpret the disciples' silence as an indication of fear over what they'd seen and heard. This is certainly a plausible explanation. But, I wonder if maybe there isn't more than one. I wonder if maybe it was about **more** than fear. What if the disciples' silence allowed them to obey God's command? Think about that... Peter, James and John had just heard God say, "**This is my Son, my chosen - listen to him!**" So instead of running and telling the world what they'd seen on the mountain, what if they chose instead to **obey**? What if they chose to be silent so they could **listen**? In a world bustling with noise and chaos where words are shouted without consequence, inciting violence. Where rhetoric is cruel and divisive, stirring up fear and anxiety. Where the minute someone opens their mouth to speak, we're already hard at work figuring what we want say. Perhaps this is the word from the Lord that we need to hear: **Listen!** Cutting through all the clamor: **Listen!** Confounding our understanding, God beckons us, ever so gently: **Listen!**

Alfred Brendel, musician, essayist and poet once pointed out: "The word 'listen' contains the same letters as the word 'silent.'" So, imagine for a moment what might the world look like if we took the time to be silent and just listen? What would our **lives** look like? Not in preparation to **respond**, but in order to **understand**. What might our **politics** look like if we listened more and argued less? What might our **schools** look like if we taught our children how to listen as intently and deliberately as we taught them how to speak and write? What might our **churches** look like if we listened intently for the voice of God from those who differ from us and with whom we disagree?

In his book, *Bread for the Journey*, theologian Henri Nouwen writes: "To listen is very hard because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have a need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept..." "The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends..." "To get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you." Brothers and sisters – as our Lenten journey approaches, as the world's chaos presses in with voices of despair ringing in our ears, may we remember how to listen! For it is in listening that we truly hear one another. And it is in listening that we hear the voice of God.

Amen and amen.