

## **“God is (Still) Speaking”**

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Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

*Mark 9:2-9*

This morning, we observe the final Sunday after Epiphany as we look toward the next season in the church calendar, Lent which begins on Wednesday. Worship helps us to view our lives through the frame of the church calendar. We can gain a perspective we might otherwise miss in the day-to-day of our lives. This is our reason for gathering together each week, to notice the world and our lives differently, and to affirm our connection with God.

The gospel writer Mark begins his gospel account with the announcement that his narrative is about the good news of Jesus Christ. In Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism, no one else sees the heavens open or the Spirit alighting on Jesus. He alone hears God’s affirmation: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.” Nothing is made public. Nothing’s obvious.

Notice that Jesus receives this affirmation before he begins his ministry. He hasn’t preached or performed any miracles. Jesus hasn’t told any stories, healed anyone or even called any disciples. He simply comes out of the river where John had just baptized him and hears, “In you I find happiness.”

How wonderful to begin with such an assurance. Assurance that is there for each of us as well. Assurance that we need to share over and over again with anybody who has trouble accepting it: God loves you just as you are.

This is what happened when Jesus was baptized. Today, he is on the mountaintop with three disciples and they hear similar words: “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!”

While it’s true that we don’t do anything to earn the love God offers so freely, we are expected to use the gifts God gives us toward God’s kin-dom. We are accountable for how we use them. Since his baptism, Jesus has been using his gifts in his ministry.

He has called disciples – Simon, Andrew, James and John, Levi, Philip; Bartholomew; Matthew; Thomas; James; Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean; and Judas. He has been preaching and teaching in synagogues, by the lake and on the road. He responds to questions and challenges. He uses stories, parables, about weddings and wineskins, farmers and mustard seeds. He has been healing people of all sorts of diseases. He has fed the multitude.

Jesus does so much. He even accepted criticism from a woman whose daughter he’d refused to help, “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

“Good answer!” he said. “Go home. Your daughter is well.”

Jesus has been calling people to hear his message about God’s love, saying things like, “Follow me.” And “Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!” He’s been calling us to live in God’s justice and God’s peace, saying things like, “Listen carefully! God will evaluate you with the same standard you use to evaluate others.” And “You give them something to eat.” And “It’s what comes out of a person that contaminates someone.” Saying, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” And “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” And this is only from Mark’s gospel. Anyone who thinks Christian faith is only about assent to a doctrine is fooling themselves.

After all of this, Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for what’s ahead, telling them that his way will lead to the cross.

In all of this, Jesus offers a clear, consistent message of ethical living and justice for all people. And on the mountaintop, God confirms that it is spot on. God beloved child has his work affirmed by God, “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” For the only time in Mark’s gospel, the voice from heaven speaks to Jesus’ disciples.

Peter, James and John stand witness to the glory of it all as Jesus is transformed in front of them, his clothes brighter than if they’d been bleached. And God’s voice calls out, telling them to bow down and worship Jesus, confessing him as Lord. Right? Well, actually, no.

We might expect that God would say this. It sounds religious enough. Peter seems to have expected it. He was ready to build little tabernacles right there if Jesus had only given him the word. But worship is not what God tells the disciples to do. What God says is, “Listen!”

This would have been unexpected. And yet, even knowing the story, would we have been ready for those words?

We know now. We’re reminded every week to listen to God’s Word. And still we have trouble hearing it. The problem is that Jesus says words people want to hear. “The challenge is that what Jesus [means] by them and what the people [think he means are] not always the same thing.” This is as true today as it was 2000 years ago.

We listen, but what do we hear? And what does what we hear mean? Some people say that listening to Jesus has been good for their business. Or that they listen and they win. Others listen to Jesus and say that their problems are solved. Maybe. But when I read Mark’s gospel account I don’t find anything like this.

20<sup>th</sup> century composer Igor Stravinsky said, “To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.” This is true of music, yet how much more so for faith. It’s easy to admire Christ. Listening and then obeying and following take a lot more effort.

Still, almost everyone listens to some degree. The challenge is that we hear different things. So many issues in the world call for our attention. If only we had concrete answers.

“Jesus, where are you on immigration reform? What should we do?” Jesus talks a lot about welcoming the stranger. Yet we find nothing in scripture about whether the strangers we welcome need documentation. We hear nothing about specific border security proposals. What does Jesus say? What do you hear when you listen?

“Jesus, what about gun control? We hear, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ but these weapons

didn't exist back then. What shall we do? What are we to believe? What are we to work toward?"

Some Christians seem to believe they take their position from Jesus' teachings – whether they're for gun control or against it, for a wall or for sanctuary cities. Even within one faith community, we can each think Jesus is in our corner, supporting our very different views.

"Jesus, the United Methodist Church has set up a group of people to examine the issue of full inclusion of GLBTQ+ in the life and leadership of the church. You say many things about creating inclusive communities and welcoming everyone, but you didn't specifically address issues of sexual orientation or gender identity. What are we to think?"

Again, people who listen faithfully hear very different things. If you've been listening to me this last seven months you may know some of what I believe Jesus intends, but this isn't about me. It isn't about you either.

The story I read during children's time is from John Godfrey Saxe's poem, "The Six Blind Men of Indostan." Each one sees only partially, just as we see and hear partially. We understand more completely when we listen to each other and consider others' perspectives.

This sharing allows us to hear the Christ in each other. We need this. We need to listen and to wrestle with what we think we hear. We need to nurture this listening so that we can hear what God is speaking to us – from varied sources.

What gets in the way of our listening?

Peter sees Moses and Elijah with Jesus and his mind starts working "Let's make three shrines!" He misses the point; is it any wonder that God almost interrupts him? We need to tune in and make sure we use our gifts as God intends. Only by truly listening can we expect to stay on the path day-to-day.

Impatience can get in the way of our listening. We can be so focused on what we think we know that we're like Pat who unwraps their first-ever fishing pole takes it down to the pond so quickly that mom and dad don't have a chance to give the other gift – a well-stocked tackle box. Hours later, Pat comes back home – empty handed. Only then does dad get to show how to set everything up. Some of us are go, go, go. Forgetting to wait for instructions, we step out in front of Christ.

Our own creativity can also get in the way of listening. We think of ways to improve this or that. We can do so much yet God's intention is not for us to be fiercely independent thinkers but cooperative, obedient ones, sharing what we think and notice. We create infinite possibilities but we need to check in all the time to notice if we're following God's will. If our plans have more to do with the mountaintop than being salt and light for the world, we aren't listening. For all our good ideas, we need to find out if our idea fits with what God knows it can be if put our heads together with others.

God wants us to use our minds, as well as our bodies and energies, in active ways for God's kingdom yet we have to listen to know what that way is.

On the mountaintop the word came to Jesus' disciples, "Listen to him." On this Transfiguration Sunday, the same word comes to us: Listen... Listen...

What do you hear?