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“Listen to Him”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Transfiguration Sunday (Year B)

February 11, 2018

Mark 9:2-8

I don't know what happened that day on the mountaintop. I don't know how Mark knows what happened that day on the mountaintop. None of us knows *exactly* what happened that day upon the mountaintop, but it must have been something amazing.

Jesus, who has been teaching, preaching, healing, feeding the masses, and casting out demons all across Galilee, has declared to his disciples that “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Six days later, Mark tells us, Jesus ascends a high mountain with Peter, James, and John. His clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear and speak with Jesus. It doesn't take a genius to know that something extremely significant is happening here.

As Jesus glows brightly in glorious light, flanked on either side by those who represent the history of God's people, it is clear that he is no mere mortal. Jesus is the Christ, the Holy One of God, the Messiah. Peter had declared it only a week earlier, but now that declaration has taken on a power and presence he could not have imagined.

To their credit, the disciples realize that something big is happening before them. Such an experience renders James and John speechless. But not Peter. He's like a morning-person extrovert who's had one-too-many cups of coffee and just can't shut-up. Plus, he was terrified. So he covered up his fear by offering to do something. "Hey Jesus, this is great! This is just great. Why don't we build a tent for you here and, well, one over there for Moses, and maybe one over there for Elijah. And we can" I imagine his voice faltering as he sees Jesus looking at him. Then the cloud comes and overshadows them all, and shuts Peter up, the cloud not unlike the one that covered Moses on the mountain in Exodus. Remember how God comes to the people in a pillar of cloud by day? Well, God is here. And Peter is finally smart enough to hold his tongue. Then the voice from the cloud comes and echoes the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Then suddenly, as soon as they had come, the cloud and voice are gone and the disciples stand alone with Jesus. This time, they knew that God had been in their midst. This time, their awe kept them silent. You see, this experience on the mountaintop was more than just a "neat" event. It was a revelation. It was an epiphany. It was a transfiguration. It was a theophany. It was an experience of God. Holy. Awesome. Transforming.

And Peter, James, and John never speak of it again.

Maybe it was because on the way down the mountain, Jesus ordered them not to. Or maybe it was because they knew that sometimes even to mention an experience such as this one would be to reduce it painfully in scope and value and meaning. Maybe these three disciples knew this and like Mary the mother of Jesus, who had been told of her impending future, "kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." Maybe experiences of the holy have to be handled in such a way. Maybe they do.

Now would be a great time to tell you that Peter, James and John became disciples extraordinaire, demonstrating in themselves a faith and a power and even a holiness in their own ministry, in their own following of Jesus. But you

already know that's not what happened. As a matter of fact, the disciples came down the mountain and fell flat on their proverbial faces. Though less than a fortnight earlier Jesus had given the disciples power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, the moment Peter, James, and John descend from the mountain of glory, they are faced with the opportunity to cast out a demon and they cannot do it. Perhaps all that glory and success on the mountaintop had gone to their heads, made them forget what they were called to do, who they were called to be, and kept them from being able to perform the basic tasks of their calling.

Presbyterian elder and author Anne Lamott tells the story of a time she was asked to preach at her small, but incredibly supportive and loving church in southern California. She preached on the story of Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho who helped hide the Israelite spies and, along with her family, was spared because of a red cord she hung out her window. As she preached, Lamott wore a red cord around her wrist and retold this story in a way that captivated her beloved congregation. But the glory went to her head. She writes:

When I finished my sermon . . . , everyone clapped like mad, and I felt like Miss Spiritual America, with a red cord and an invisible tiara. I greeted everyone after the service with humility, ducking my head shyly and all but pawing the ground with my foot. A few of the older women teared up when they thanked me, remembering the wreck I'd been when I first started coming to St. Andrew, a year before I got sober.

Then I went home and had a huge fight with [my son].¹

Sometimes, just when we think we are "Miss Spiritual America," or just when we have come down from the mountain, witnesses to an indescribable event, we find ourselves face-to-face with real life and we fall flat. From the mountaintop to reality is not an easy journey to make.

¹ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 22.

But I think God makes very clear what our calling is as disciples of Christ who are coming down from the mountaintop experience. We are called to follow Jesus. We are called to listen to him. “This is my son, the Beloved,” bellows the voice from the cloud. “Listen to him.”

In our world today, many of us are wondering where we can find the truth and what voice is worthy of our attention. “Who should we listen to?” we wonder, and, writes one blogger, “It is a vital question confronting us in this age of media overload, “alternative facts,” “fake news,” partisan political propaganda, flashy advertising, and competing religious voices.”² And then, in all our searching for the answer to that question, we find it right here, in front of us all the time. If there is one thing this passage makes clear, it is God’s clear instruction to us about Jesus: “Listen to him.”

Let his voice, let his teachings, let his truth be your guide. No other voice should supplant this voice. This is my son. The Beloved. Listen to him.

Listen to him when he says that he is going to suffer and die and be raised again in three days.

Listen to him when he says to watch and stay awake while he prays.

Listen to him when he tells you not to pick up arms against one another.

Listen to him when he teaches you how to love one another.

Listen to him when he warns you not to judge, lest you be judged.

Listen to him when he begs you to forgive one another as the Father in heaven forgives you.

Listen to him when he says, “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”

² <https://shiftingmargins.com/2018/02/08/to-whom-shall-we-listen/>, (2-9-18)

Whenever we stop, on the mountaintop or plateau, and really listen to what God is revealing to us in Christ, then we, too, have the potential to be transformed by the revelation. Whenever we really listen to Jesus, through prayer and meditation, Bible reading and study, corporate worship and connections with one another, we open ourselves up to God's transformation which will equip us for service and love in the world.

And so, friends, as we move forward into Lent this week, I encourage you to think of the ways you do or do not listen to Jesus in the course of your day, in the course of your week, in the course of your life. How are you creating space for God to speak to you? How is your routine blocking God out? How might God be waiting to transform our lives?

"This is my Son, the Beloved," says the voice from the cloud. "Listen to him. Listen to him! Listen. To. Him.

In the name of the Triune God. Amen.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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