

Luke 9:28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said.

34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said,

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

PLEASE LISTEN!

Please listen.

I bet you've heard that before. Teachers say that to their class. Children say that to their parents and visa versa. Husbands and wives say this to each other all the time.

Please listen.

We talk about listening skills and learning to listen. But, from my observation we often are not doing a very good job. We don't listen. We are preoccupied with our own lives and what we want to say.

Are you a good listener? Do you take the time to really understand what the other person has to say? Our relationships with friends and family will suffer if we do not learn how to listen.

SPIRITUALLY DEAF

In the same way our relationship with God also suffers if we do not learn how to listen.

There are many times in Scripture when God's people are commanded to listen. But, quite often they do not have ears to hear. Instead of listening to the commands of God,

God's people looked for solace in "other gods." They were spiritually deaf.

Scripture refers to them as a "stiff necked" and stubborn people. And they were often judged because they would not listen to the voice of God.

This was also true for those who first heard Jesus. They just didn't listen.

Jesus often preceded his teachings with this phrase, "Let anyone with ears listen." But, they didn't do it. As Jesus put it, "... seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen."

The religious leaders were particularly deaf when it came to the message of Jesus. They couldn't hear him because they thought that they already knew the truth. They were the keepers of the truth.

In Matthew's gospel we read,

"For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart ..." (Matthew 13:15)

DEAF DISCIPLES

But, don't think that this inability to listen was limited to Jesus' adversaries. Jesus' own disciples also had a listening problem.

The disciples called Jesus Messiah, but the disciples had their own agenda for the coming kingdom. They wanted Jesus to be a political Messiah, a great commander in chief who would defeat the Romans and restore Israel to the glory days of David and Solomon.

Now don't misunderstand. Those first disciples were very sincere and brave men. But, their ability to hear Jesus' message was limited by their assumptions about the coming kingdom.

In our story for today I think the disciples' lack of insight is symbolized by the fact that when Peter, James and John followed Jesus up the mountain to pray, they had a hard time staying awake. The Scripture tells us they were "weighed down with sleep."

You'll remember that this was not the only time the disciples would have trouble keeping their eyes open during a time of prayer. This inner circle failed Jesus miserably in the Garden of Gethsemane. He told them to watch and pray ... on three different occasions. And what happened? They fell asleep.

This is the predominant posture of the disciple throughout the gospels ... asleep at the switch! Even the inner circle of disciple are not aware of what is going on around them.

A DEAF CHURCH

I wonder if we in the church are a lot like those first disciples ... asleep at the switch. We are not aware of what is really important because we have a hard time listening to Jesus. Jesus calls us up the mountain to pray, but we fall asleep. Jesus gives us a work of kindness to perform, but we do not hear the call.

So perhaps the greatest need for us in the church is the need to wake up and listen. Maybe we need to pray more and sleep less!

No, I'm not talking about real sleep. Wives please don't poke you husbands in the ribs; they just listen better with their eyes closed!

I'm talking about spiritual sleep. I'm talking about being deaf to the call of Jesus today.

God tells us as he told those first disciples, "Listen to Jesus." In fact that word translated "listen" implies continuous action. So an appropriate dynamic translation

might be, “Keep on listening to Jesus or continue listening to Jesus.” In other words listening to Jesus is a continual struggle. We can never assume that we have heard him clearly. We always have to be open to the possibility that we have not received the message.

The disciples weren't listening to Jesus. And sometimes we don't listen either. Why don't we listen? What is it that dulls our hearts to the point that seeing we do not see and hearing we do not hear?

I think that our reasons for not listening are no different from those disciples who climbed the mountain with Jesus so many years ago.

BUILDING SHRINES INSTEAD OF LISTENING

First and foremost, I think that we are unable to listen because we are preoccupied with our own needs and ideas. We are like Peter who was afflicted with a “terminal hoof in mouth disease.” We don't know what to say, but we say it anyway.

The Bible tells us that when Peter talked about constructing a monument on the mountaintop ... three dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah ... he said that because he didn't know what else to say.

When we humans don't know what to do, we build a monument. There are magnificent religious buildings all over the world. Some of them took centuries to build. And yet many of them are testimonies to the fact that we do not listen to Jesus.

Where do you think they got the money to build many of these beautiful cathedrals? They took advantage of the superstitious poor. The religious leaders suggested that salvation could be bought at a price, the price of a beautiful shrine on the mountaintop.

Successful ministry in our day and time is often measured in the same way. Faithfulness is measured by the scope of our next building project.

Are we doing this for Jesus or are we doing this because we have our own agenda? Sadly we often do and say things in the church because we are clueless about the kingdom. We are not listening to Jesus; we are listening to our own hopes and dreams.

A pastor once told me that when his congregation was taking part in a major building project they all worked together in perfect harmony. Unfortunately, once the building project was completed, they were torn apart by dissension.

I wonder if this wasn't an example of the mountaintop effect. Building shrines on the mountaintop may last for a while, but it is not a substitute for listening to Jesus and following him to a new place.

If we have a me first religion ... if we're always thinking about what is good for ourselves ... we'll be unable to really listen to God. We won't be able to hear the words of Jesus because often our desires run counter to what God would call us to do.

So, if we have trouble listening to Jesus, maybe we're too busy talking! We are too preoccupied with our own ideas and needs. We're too busy building shrines instead of listening for our marching orders.

THEOLOGICALLY DEAF

A second (and perhaps related) reason that we don't listen to Jesus is that we don't like what he says. To put it another way, our view of God is different from Jesus' view of God. It's ironic, but one of the reasons we can't listen to God is that we are busy talking about God!

That was why the religious leaders of Jesus' day rejected him. Jesus' theology was suspect. Quite often Jesus would say something like, "You have heard it said, but I say to you ..." And then he would proceed to say

something that was totally different from what the church leaders of the day taught.

For example Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...” (Matthew 5:43-44)

Would be disciples and religious leaders alike didn't want to hear a teaching like that. Indeed, there are some who profess to be disciples of Jesus today who don't want to hear a teaching like that. It's too hard. It doesn't fit in with our ideas about justice.

And as a result some of us conveniently decide not to listen to Jesus ... for theological reasons! Jesus' theology doesn't fit in with our commonly held assumptions.

I once met a person who was a very pleasant and helpful person. And when she learned in the course of conversation that I was a minister she said that she had a question about the Bible.

Being a very organized and goal oriented person, she wanted to know what the Bible had to say about planning. What does the Bible say about planning? I didn't get that question very often, but I accepted the challenge to find the answer.

A few weeks later I came back to her with the results of my research. I told her that planning ... at least in the sense that we use the word ... does not seem to be used in the Bible. However, the Bible does talk about the plan or purpose that God has for each of us quite a lot. It is a major theme in the Bible.

So, when it comes to planning for the future, the Bible teaches us that in a sense we cannot plan for the future. It is God who plans our life for us, and we must submit to God's plan.

I was very pleased with myself. This was a highly researched and very Presbyterian answer. But, she was not Presbyterian, and she was most definitely not happy with my answer. This was not the answer she wanted or expected to hear!

She curtly told me that I was wrong, and she was going to do her own Bible study to determine what the Bible had to say about planning.

I must say that this woman was honest enough to do her own study on this topic, and when I saw her several weeks later, she told me that I was right. The Bible didn't say a whole lot about personal planning ... except to say that we shouldn't do it! She was finally able to listen.

I am grateful for the courage of this woman to be honest to God on this issue and finally hear what God had to say. Often this is not the case. Our views are sometimes too strong, and this makes us unable to really hear what God is saying.

TOO AFRAID TO LISTEN

A third, and even stronger reason, that we don't hear what Jesus says is that Jesus not only says something that we don't want to hear; Jesus says something that makes us afraid.

Fear is a powerful motivator. If we are afraid we have a hard time hearing anything. Fearful people will react in ways that are not typical.

And so when Jesus tells us that we're going down the mountain into the valley of persecution and pain, like Peter we don't want to go. We are afraid of what might happen in the valley. We are afraid that following Jesus might also mean suffering and sacrifice.

Surely this should not come as a surprise for us. The central symbol of our faith is a cross. If our Lord could not escape the valley of suffering and sacrifice, surely we cannot escape it either.

And yet, we are often like Peter. We glory in the mountaintop, but when the time of testing comes in the valley, when we are asked to choose Jesus over safety, our nerve often fails us, and we deny him.

Our passage for today is a mountaintop surrounded by two valleys. The glory of the mountain is surrounded on either side by Jesus predicting the kind of suffering and death he must undergo in Jerusalem. And not only that ... Jesus also told these would be disciples,

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:23-24)

No wonder the disciples didn't want to make that trip into Jerusalem. No wonder Peter wanted to stay on the mountaintop indefinitely. Even though they had a hard time hearing what Jesus had to say, they knew deep down that sacrifice would be required. And it was frightening to them.

Of course Jesus talked about more than suffering and death in Jerusalem. He also talked about a resurrection. But, they couldn't hear because resurrection was beyond their experience.

Unlike the disciples we have heard and understand more about resurrection. We have heard about a hope for life beyond life. But, hearing the promise and trusting the promise are two different things.

EXODUS

In Luke's gospel we learn that Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah about this promise. Jerusalem would not only be a place of rejection, suffering and death. It would also be a place of salvation.

In Luke 9:31 we read, "They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem." Actually, the word translated "departure" might also be translated "exodus."

There's a connection between the salvation of the past and the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. Do you remember the story of the Exodus from Egypt? Moses climbed the mountain. His face shone with the reflected glory of God. Remember how he heard a voice and saw a light that overwhelmed him?

Well, this same Moses, the lawgiver is back ... along with Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. And now they speak

of a greater salvation, a new exodus, an exodus that would lead from a cross and death to eternal life.

Though they are on the way to the cross, the fearful disciples are also given a revelation of where the journey with Jesus is leading ... not simply to martyrdom, but also to glory.

OVERSHADOWED

Like those first disciples, most of us are reluctant to take up our cross and follow Jesus. In fact we have a hard time listening to someone who would suggest such an idea. We want the kingdom on our own terms and not on the terms that God reveals in Jesus Christ.

How can we learn to listen and keep on listening to Jesus? We, like Peter, James and John need to be “overshadowed” by the cloud of God’s presence. We too need a sense of the holy, the “otherness” of God.

We too need to quit talking so much. We too need to quit planning our own life and instead submit ourselves to the plans and purposes of Almighty God.

On our own we cannot do it. But, through the power of God our lives can also be interrupted by the gracious command of salvation.

The Bible tells us that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” More than anything else, I believe that we need to learn and experience the truth of that statement. We need to be totally overwhelmed with a sense of God’s holiness. The power and majesty of God’s presence can teach us more in a moment than a thousand books on religion.

Like the disciples of old we need to be left speechless in the presence of One who is so much greater than us. Then and only then will we really begin to listen.

Mountaintop experiences are rare. But, we can do what the God of the mountaintop demanded of the disciples. We can listen to Jesus. We can recognize that in the life and ministry of Jesus we see the true reflection of God.

And when we do that, we draw close to God. And we are overwhelmed by the experience.

A CLOSER VIEW

A couple was attending a meeting in Rome, Italy. They toured the Vatican and waited in line for hours to get a glimpse of Michelangelo’s work in the Sistine Chapel.

They said that from a distance the paintings didn't look all that impressive. People even chatted and joked about getting a paint by number replica of Michelangelo's work for their own ceilings.

But, when they drew closer, they were overwhelmed. The paintings seemed to engulf them. Everyone became quiet. Necks ached with the effort to keep looking up. Now they were seeing the paintings as Michelangelo intended for them to be seen. The impact was unforgettable.

Take this as a parable of how we are to view the glory of God as revealed in Jesus. Some of us try to view that glory from afar. But, the view from afar is not very impressive.

But, when we draw close and follow Jesus wherever he leads we begin to see things from a different perspective.

Friends, we need to keep looking up. We need to keep listening to Jesus. And if we do our perspective on life will change.

We will see not only suffering and sacrifice but also glory and salvation. The picture begins to loom over us. And we are changed forever.

The mountain of transfiguration was not the last mountain Jesus climbed. The last mount was a place called Calvary. And on that mount life was snatched from death, sin was overcome and the world was transfigured by the God who made it.

This coming week we begin the season of Lent. We once again go down the mountain and follow Jesus on the way to the cross.

Let us once again wake up to the importance of this moment.

Let us confess our sin. Let us pray.

And above all, let us continue listening to the voice of Jesus.

His message will change us forever.

Amen.