

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.

TOO DISTRACTED TO LISTEN

In our reading for the Stephen Ministry program there was a story about a person who worked as a volunteer crisis counselor. He was watching TV when a call came to the home.

The man answered the call but he failed to turn off the TV. In fact from time to time he glanced at the TV as he listened to the caller's problem.

Finally, the caller asked, "Are you watching TV?" The would be counselor replied, "Well, the TV is on but ..."

And with that the caller hung up.

The moral of that story is that if you're going to be a counselor, maybe you better turn off the TV. The TV is a distraction that keeps us from really listening. You have to wonder if that counselor really wanted to listen.

One of my psychology professors told of a time when he was counseling a young lady. It was a warm afternoon, and my professor said that his mind turned to golf. Oh, if he could only be outside enjoying his favorite sport.

About that time his reverie was interrupted by his client, "You're not listening to me."

My professor said, "I was leaning forward. I was looking right at her. But, she knew. She knew that I wasn't listening, that I was distracted by something else."

Why is so hard for us to listen? First, there are some people that are hard to listen to. Their story is difficult to hear. And sometimes we would like to be somewhere else.

OLD DEMONS

And secondly, and perhaps more importantly sometimes it's hard to listen because the stories that others tell us stir up old demons, old problems that we have not conquered.

All of us try our best to keep those demons at bay.

We often fill our lives with distractions in an attempt to ignore those demonic voices. And chief among those voices is the voice of fear.

The great baseball pitcher Satchel Paige used to say, "Don't look back. Something may be gaining on you."

In a sense, that can be a helpful approach. We need, at least to a certain extent, to forget the past and take care of the present.

Satchel Paige did that, and it enabled him to forget many years of discrimination and play in the major leagues at an advanced age.

But, that statement also contains an element of fear. Many of us don't look back or forward because we are haunted by the past and afraid of the future. The past is filled with regret and the future is filled with uncertainty.

And that cripples us in our living today.

We don't have "time" to really listen because we are afraid of what we might hear. And so we fill our lives with noise and activity.

If we keep running and don't look back we don't have to face our fears. We won't have to acknowledge that something is gaining on us.

FACING OUR FEARS

But, in the final analysis, that's not an effective way to live. We can't listen to others until we first listen to and honestly face our own fears

When people are trained to become counselors one of the first things they must do is deal with their own fears. The counselor needs to be in touch with his or her own feelings. If a counselor is distracted by the voice of fear, he or she cannot really listen and cannot be of help to another person.

And I think the same is true for those who would serve in the name of Jesus.

If you're going to listen to God, and if you're going to listen to others in his name, you're going to have to deal with you fear.

Its no accident that the first words out of the angel's mouth are: "Don't be afraid."

That's God's message to the world.

Overcoming fear is the first step in listening to the good news.

SPEAKING OUT OF FEAR

I'm fascinated by Peter's response to the Transfiguration.

Jesus is praying. But, what are Peter, James and John doing? They're about to fall asleep.

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 disciples throughout the gospels ... asleep at the switch! Even the inner circle of disciples is not aware of what is going on around them.

But, Peter and the other disciples "wake up" long enough to notice that things have changed on their mountaintop retreat. Jesus is glowing like an angel, and some luminaries from the past, Moses and Elijah, have joined him.

And how does Peter respond to this vision? He says,

"This is great. Let's stay here. Let's make three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Now why does Peter say this? The Bible tells us that he says this because he doesn't know what to say. Peter in his anxiety says something, but what he says is not very helpful.

How many times do we say something when we should be quiet and listen? Often, this happens. Why do we do this? We are afraid. We talk out of anxiety instead of knowledge.

We don't know what to say, but that sure doesn't keep us from talking! We think if there's too much dead air in a conversation, there's a problem. And the anxious voices in our head begin to take over.

Like Peter we speak without knowledge.

This often happens when there is a crisis. For example, what do we say at the funeral home? We often use clichés. We say things like, "He's in a better place."

And the bereaved person might give a pained smile but they will be thinking, "Really, that's my daddy over there. His place is with me. How dare you say he's in a better place?"

Now of course it's okay to agree with a grieved person when he or she makes that statement. It's true that those who die in Christ are with the Lord. In life and in death we belong to God and that is a word of comfort.

But, we can't say that right away. When someone has been blindsided by the shock of grief, words meant to be comforting can actually cause a great deal of harm.

PRAY AND LISTEN

Now don't freak out if you've said this or something like this. All of us have used clichés at a time of grief and crisis.

But, there's a better way. We can resist the urge to speak when we don't know what to say. Instead we can pray and listen.

In fact I would suggest that often those two words are closely related.

You'll notice that our lesson for today begins with a time of prayer. Jesus is praying on the mountaintop. And it is during the prayer that Jesus is transfigured. We see Jesus in all his glory.

Jesus is portrayed in the gospels and especially in the gospel of Luke as a man of prayer. What is prayer? What is Jesus doing when he prays?

One of the things he is doing is listening. He is listening for the voice of his heavenly Father. Jesus often felt the need to get away from the distractions of the world so that he could pray, so that he could listen to the voice that comes from above.

But, the disciples did not feel that need. When things got quiet they fell asleep. They, like most of us, had a hard time really listening to God.

I think this is an area where the Roman Catholics could teach us a thing or two about prayer. In their tradition silent retreats are often used to enhance spiritual discernment.

Most of us would find such a retreat to be unnerving. Perhaps it is because we are like the disciples. We have trouble really listening for God's Word.

Remember when the presence of God came to the prophet Elijah. The Bible tells us that the Lord did not come in the earthquake or the fire or the windstorm. God came in the still, small voice.

That soft voice forced the prophet to listen, to really listen.

Elijah learned that God was with him in the silence. And when he strained to hear, when he really listened the prophet heard a message of salvation in a time of despair. (See 1 Kings 19)

Prayer is straining to hear the voice of God, really listening for the voice of the Divine in the moment of sheer silence. You may have noticed that this potentially makes everything we do a prayerful activity.

In fact the Apostle Paul said that we should pray without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Paul meant that we should listen for the deeper meaning in our lives. Each moment is an opportunity to hear the voice of God. Each moment is an opportunity to deepen our walk with Jesus if only we had ears to hear.

THE DIVINE INTERRUPTION

The transfiguration of Jesus was a brief moment of clarity and light in a muddled and dark world. In one brief moment the disciples saw the glory of God. The past, the present and the future came together in One Eternal Now.

The disciples woke up for just an instant to the immanence of a Holy God. God was there. Of course God had always been there in the words of the law and the prophets. But, now God is especially present in the words and ministry of Jesus.

Later on the disciples will understand. That's why they we have this story. After the crucifixion and the resurrection it all made sense to them.

But, at the moment it happened it did not make sense. They didn't know what to say, and they were not listening. In fact, Peter was talking.

So, God interrupted Peter's speech. The Bible tells us a cloud overshadowed the disciples, and they were terrified.

And a voice in the cloud said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

You would think that disciples of Jesus wouldn't need to be told to listen. After all Peter, James and John represent the inner circle of disciples. They had been with Jesus from the very beginning.

And yet they did not listen to Jesus.
And we don't listen to him either.

In some ways we know Jesus so well. We have read about his mighty deeds. We have studied his words of truth and justice. And yet, in many ways Jesus remains a stranger.

Why is that? Why does the voice from heaven still have to overwhelm us and tell us to listen?

A DIFFICULT MESSAGE

Could it be that we have trouble listening to Jesus because his message is difficult to hear? Could it be that we don't really want to hear his message?

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today Jesus makes his first Passion prediction, a prediction that when he goes into Jerusalem there will be suffering, a cross, and a resurrection.

And then Jesus makes it plain what that will mean for those who wanted to be his disciples. He said,

"If any want to become my followers, 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. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves."

If we're going to listen to Jesus, if we're going to follow Jesus, this is the message that we must hear and obey. It is a message of selfless service based upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

This is why we make the trek up the Mountain of Transfiguration each year. This is why we make the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus each Lent.

This is why we spend some time at the Last Supper. This is why we take a long hard look at the cross. And this is why we celebrate the resurrection.

It's how we listen to Jesus. It's how we listen to God.

Jesus knew that his disciples weren't perfect. Only Jesus could be the Savior. Only Jesus could die for the sins of the world on the cross. But, the disciples *could* take up the cross of self-sacrifice each day in his name.

A MESSAGE OF SALVATION

Taking up a cross of self-sacrifice sounds so grim, so impossible.

But, Jesus said, "This is how you live a life worth living. Oddly enough, when you give your life away, you find salvation."

In Matthew 25 we read that even the smallest act of compassion is a big thing in God's kingdom. In fact it is a way to experience the presence of God. It is a way to experience the presence of Jesus.

It is salvation. (See Matthew 25:31-45)

This week I heard about a scientific study on the relationship between money and happiness. The subjects of this experiment were given what the researchers called a "money shower".

One group was told to spend the money however they wished. The other group was told that they had to give their windfall away to others.

Months later the two groups were surveyed and questioned regarding their happiness. Which group do you think was happiest?

That's right. The group that gave away their money to others reported the most satisfaction.

Sacrifice, giving, taking up a cross in the name of Jesus can in the long run produce more happiness.

But, this can be a hard thing to accept.

The road to Jerusalem certainly did not look like the road to salvation. And it took a long time for the disciples to really listen and understand Jesus.

In fact it took another vision from heaven after the resurrected Jesus had ascended into heaven. It took the Spirit descending upon them as it had on Jesus earlier.

(We'll get to the story a little later at Pentecost.)

LISTEN TO HIM

But, today we think about the Mount of Transfiguration. That place where the disciples were stopped in their tracks by voice of God.

The cloud of his Presence overwhelmed them. It terrified them. It brought them to their knees. The cloud of God's glory left them in stunned silence.

From time to time the cloud of God's presence needs to overshadow us.

The cloud of God's presence refocuses our attention on Jesus. The cloud of God's presence judges our tendency to talk too much and listen too little.

The Bible tells us that we should be "quick to listen and slow to speak." (James 1:19)

I would challenge you to put that into practice.

Do that not only in your relationship with others but also in your relationship with God.

This Word of God has come to earth in His Son, Jesus.

Listen to him.

Amen.