

LISTEN!
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 9:2-9

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, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹ 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.

A SACRED TIME OF LISTENING

Many years ago I visited a parishioner who was in the VA hospital. For some reason I had to stop by the chaplain’s office. I found out that the chaplain was a Presbyterian minister. And it just so happened that this was his last day on the job before he retired.

The chaplain began to talk to me about how he really didn’t know what he would do after retirement. He wondered out loud if he would have enough money. He was afraid that not having a job to go to each day would make his life less meaningful.

I sensed that this chaplain really needed to talk so I took the time to listen. In fact I listened for forty five minutes. At the end of our time together the chaplain said,

“I know what it means to really listen, and I know that you have really listened to me today. Thank you.”

What I thought would be a brief encounter turned into a meaningful time of ministry. In fact I would even say that our time together was sacred time.

Today we are going to commission our second class of Stephen Ministers. And one of the first things Stephen Ministers are encouraged to do is really listen.

Therapeutic listening can be hard work because we strive to hear more the words that are spoken; we also try to understand the emotions that are behind those words.

We try to walk a mile in someone else's shoes.

But, Stephen Ministers have another reason to listen. They listen in the name of Christ, and they listen for Christ.

They not only listen for the emotions behind the words; they also listen for the sacred story taking place in the life of the person they serve.

What is Christ saying to this person, and what is Christ saying to us in this encounter?

The answers to those questions are not always apparent. But, I think they are the important questions to ask, not only for Stephen Ministers but for all who would be disciples of Jesus.

We follow Jesus by listening to him.

And when we listen with our heart, soul and mind, we too are transformed.

A TURNING POINT IN THE GOSPEL

Today is the last Sunday before Lent, Transfiguration Sunday. Today we jump ahead in the story of Jesus to the very center of Mark's gospel.

Up until this time the ministry of Jesus is surrounded by mystery and misunderstanding. Jesus says what only God can say and does what only God can do, but people are not sure who he is or what he has come to do.

When Jesus asked his disciples what the people were saying about him, the answers varied quite a bit. Some thought that he was the reincarnation of John the Baptist, some thought that he was Elijah, the one who

would herald the coming of the Messiah. Others thought that he was a prophet.

But, then Jesus asks the disciples a more personal question. “What about you? Who do you say that I am?” And Peter says, “You are the Messiah.”

This is the first time anyone has used the “M” word out loud. It was dangerous for people to talk about a Messiah in a land controlled by the Empire. We noted last week that Jesus didn’t disagree with what Peter said, but Jesus did tell Peter and the rest of the disciples to keep quiet about this.

Why did Jesus want the disciples to keep quiet?

It was because the disciples didn’t really understand his message. The disciples heard the words, but they hadn’t really listened to what Jesus had to say. More than that, they didn’t want to hear what Jesus had to say.

I can’t blame the disciples for not wanting to hear what Jesus had to say. Sometimes I’m not so sure that I want to hear what Jesus has to say either.

Jesus tells the disciples that his way will be the way of suffering, rejection and even death. And if they want to follow him it will involve personal sacrifice. They too will have to take up a cross and follow.

Oh yes, Jesus does mention a resurrection after those predictions of his passion, but the disciples didn’t know what that meant. The words of Jesus sounded pretty bleak.

And so Peter (I think speaking on behalf of all the disciples) rejects those words. (Mark 8:27-31)

And in the same way we too often reject those words as well.

We in the church have often turned the gospel on its head. We have said the gospel is the power of positive thinking or the way to health, wealth and happiness.

KEEP QUIET

But, the gospel is none of the above.

Listen to Jesus. He still tells us that the path to glory goes through the valley of the cross. Until we can hear that loud and clear, maybe Jesus wants us to keep quiet just as he told the disciples to keep quiet about his identity.

Sometimes when we are listening to people who have problems there is a tendency to jump in too quickly with our own opinions. We want to steer them away from the pain.

Sometimes I think we do that to alleviate our own pain as much as ending theirs.

But, that never works.

When people are on a difficult path pat answers suggest to them that we don't understand their pain, that we haven't really listened to them. We have to keep quiet and wait. We have to walk with them for a while.

And the same was true for the disciples.

They would have to walk the road to the cross. They would have to see the empty tomb. They would have to put their hands in the nail scarred hands. They would have to be filled with the Spirit of the risen Christ.

And then, and only then would they be able to understand what Jesus was talking about and proclaim the gospel to others.

TRANSFIGURATION

But, in our lesson for today, some of the disciples will get a foretaste of the glory to come. Six days after hearing this difficult prediction about suffering and a cross, our Scripture for today tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain. And they were there all alone.

And on this high mountain Jesus is transfigured.
What does that mean?

It means that the disciples saw the glory of God in Jesus. His dazzling white garment is reminiscent of the angels who greet the disciples at the

tomb after the resurrection. In a moment of special revelation these disciples catch a glimpse of the divine.

Not all the disciples had this vision of glory, just a select few. And that's still true.

Most of us cannot claim a special vision of glory. Most of us are the ones who remained in the valley while others experience the glory of the mountaintop. Indeed, we may even regard those who talk about their special revelations with a mixture of envy and skepticism.

But, perhaps we shouldn't be too jealous of those who claim special revelation. It might not be that big of an advantage. Notice that the vision of glory doesn't give the disciples extra insight. On the contrary the disciples respond to this vision with fear and misunderstanding.

SHRINE BUILDING

The disciples see the transfigured Jesus meeting with Moses and Elijah, and how do they respond? They are afraid. They don't know what to say or do. But, even the glory of God couldn't shut Peter up. He blurted out, "Teacher, this is great. Let's make three shrines. One for you. One for Moses. And one for Elijah."

We do the same thing. When we do know what to do, when we are trying to capture the holy moment, we build a shrine. Someone once said that many churches have a Field of Dreams approach to church growth. Do you remember the line from that movie? "If you build it, they will come."

But, that's not necessarily true. Holy moments can't be enshrined. A successful building project is no guarantee of a successful church. In fact I can point to a number of churches that have failed precisely because they had a building that cost too much to maintain.

If you want to follow Jesus, you have to be ready to move. There is no time to build a shrine because shrine building can keep us from really listening to Jesus. And listening to Jesus is what we are really called to do.

INTERRUPTED BY GOD

Knowing Peter I suspect he would have kept pontificating about the need to build on the mountain. But, his speech was interrupted by the voice of

God. The Scripture says a cloud overshadowed them and voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Notice that this pronouncement from above is similar to the message Jesus received at his baptism. The cloud of God's presence overwhelms the disciples and silences (at least for the time being) their speculations about the meaning of this holy event.

And when they look around they see only Jesus. The Jesus they see is not transfigured by glory. The Jesus they see is the same human Rabbi who has led them up to the pinnacle of this high lonely mountain.

And Jesus tells them as they go down the mountain, "Don't tell anybody about this until the Son of Man has risen from the dead."

Until the disciples could learn to listen to Jesus, the glory of the mountain-top would make no sense.

KEEP QUIET AND LISTEN

Like the disciples we often have a hard time hearing those things that don't line up with our understanding of how the world works.

Today there are TV and radio shows that specialize in giving us information with a bias. It is possible to hear about many things but never really have our point of view challenged.

This is true not only with the news but also with religion as well. We can keep ourselves in that small circle of people who have our own particular view about God. We spend our time reinforcing what we already believe to be true about Jesus.

I don't think this is what it means to listen to Jesus.

If we really listen to Jesus, we will be shocked by what he has to say. Our understanding of how our world works quite often will not line up with how God works in the world.

And that means that in order to listen to Jesus we must be vulnerable. We must listen long enough to learn where we have misunderstood and misrepresented the will of Jesus. We must allow voices that differ from us and challenge us to be heard.

And just as Jesus told the disciples to “keep quiet” about what they had seen on the mountain, in many cases that may be what Jesus is telling us to do as well.

The disciples had to go into the valley and make their way to the cross and beyond before they could speak of this moment. Without a resurrection, the glory of the mountaintop had no meaning.

And in the same way we too have to walk with Jesus for a while. We too have to take up a cross and follow. We too have to learn what it means to serve and hear Jesus say things that challenge us to our very core.

Jesus still tells us as he told his disciples, “Keep quiet. Listen!” When it comes to God’s revelation, many of us speak too much and listen too little.

We preachers are the worst in the world when it comes to this. We are paid to speak for God whether we hear from Him or not! But, maybe we need to make some allowance for the fact that we seek the wind of the Spirit and not just the hot air of our own voices!

The holy moment is found by the servant who is overwhelmed by the voice of God. The holy moment is found when we take time to ponder more than the sound of our own voice.

There is great mystery when we follow the way of the cross. God’s call in Christ is seldom found in the bluster and bright lights that surround us. God’s call is often found in the still, small voice.

We must learn to silence those other loud voices that compete for our attention and truly listen to him alone. We will not always be successful, but I think there are some practical things that we can do to help us really listen to Jesus.

READING THE WORD

The first step is rather obvious but one that I’ve found many of us never take. We need to actually read the words of Jesus as we find them in the gospel. I know. Life is busy and it’s hard to find time to read the Bible. After all it’s such a big book with so much to learn.

Make it easy on yourself. This year the gospel passages will come mainly from the book of Mark. Confine your reading to the book of Mark.

Begin by reading the whole book (it doesn't take long), and then just take some time to read a little bit each day. It doesn't have to be much. Just read a bit and listen to the words of Jesus as they are found in this one gospel.

Much of my preaching this year will focus on Mark's gospel and hopefully that will help you.

But, don't just listen to what I have to say or what anyone else has to say for that matter.

Focus primarily on the words of Jesus.
Let them wash over you. Let them become a part of your life.

DOING THE WORD

The second step is a bit more difficult.

I would challenge you to listen to the people in your life based upon your biblical conversation with Jesus. Where is God leading you to go or not go? What is God leading you to say or not say?

You don't have to say something right away or move in some new direction right away. In fact our text for today suggests that this would be the absolutely wrong approach.

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

Just as we are to listen intently to the words of Jesus, so we must listen intently to the words of others. We believe that in Jesus the Word became flesh, and part of what that means is that the human story can also be a sacred story.

God does have a plan for our lives.

And so, when we listen deeply to the people around us, we often encounter the sacred. The voice of Jesus is a human voice with a divine accent.

REFLECTING ON THE WORD

And the third thing we must do if we are to listen to Jesus is to listen to our own voice.

Now don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that our inner voice is equivalent to the voice of Jesus. More often than not we fill our lives with words and activities simply because (like Peter) we don't know what to do or say.

But, if we take time to reflect, if we think about what we are really saying and doing, that time of reflection can guide us toward the sacred.

This is why many people find it helpful to go on a silent retreat or take a long walk or run or whatever you do to get away.

We all need a time when we are quiet and listen.

The sound of silence helps us listen, really listen to what we are saying on the inside. And once we recognize the voice of our own fears and needs, we gain more insight into how that voice shapes our understanding of ourselves and of others.

And in that time of reflection we learn to hear the distinctive voice of Jesus, a voice that is quite different from our own inner voice.

The voice of Jesus speaks to our fears and needs. The voice of Jesus challenges us to move in new and unexpected ways. The voice of Jesus comforts us. The voice of Jesus gives us hope.

But, that will never happen unless we take time to be quiet and listen to our own voice. Self-understanding can be the beginning of a significant spiritual journey.

WOUNDED HEALERS

In this regard many in the Roman Catholic tradition are far ahead of us. When I was in seminary students and faculty would often go on guided silent retreats at the local monastery.

I personally benefitted from the guidance of a priest that was in my ministerial group in Virginia. The time of silence became a time to hear and understand my own voice as well as hear and understand the voice of Jesus.

For those who would like to explore this side of spirituality, I would suggest you read the works of Henri Nouwen. Henri was a priest and a highly trained counselor who wrote about his struggle to hear the voice of Jesus amid all the voices of fear and uncertainty in his own life. I think his works are very helpful for that reason. They give us a good example of how to use our humanity instead of denying it as we seek to hear the voice of Christ.

One book that was required reading in seminary was a book by Nouwen entitled, "The Wounded Healer." Using that phrase from Isaiah, "by his wounds we are healed"

Nouwen suggested that just as we are saved by the wounds, the sacrifice of Christ, so we can use the broken places in our life to understand and heal others.

But, first we must be still and hear the voice of God on a personal level. We must understand who we are and who God is in order to really listen.

I hope all of us can find time to listen to Jesus in the coming week. We listen for his voice in the words of Scripture. We listen for his voice in the words of those who need help. And listen for his voice in the still, small voice within us.

As they would say on Sesame street. The word for the week is: Listen!