

Sunday January 16
 Lesson 7: The Transfiguration
 Scripture: Mark 9:2-8

Context:

The winter Adult Bible Studies Curriculum continues its focus on engaging the world with the unit entitled “Wonder.” This set of lessons in the season of Epiphany will focus on how we are called to a sense of wonder in our faith. As we look to the glory of God, we are transformed and can engage in the world in new ways as disciples of Jesus. Today we will learn how actively listening to God radically changes our lives.

The text for the day comes from the gospel of Mark, found in the New Testament. The passage is known as the Transfiguration as Jesus is “transfigured” before the disciples atop a mountain. On the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, we celebrate Transfiguration Sunday as Jesus reveals his glory and his identity as the Lord.

The gospel of Mark is known as the gospel to focus on the humanity of Jesus. Jesus has emotions and displays them. The gospel is also known for the focus on action and movement; things happen “immediately” with Jesus with little time for details or pausing the narrative. Yet in today’s text both of those things change as Jesus is transformed and Jesus allows his disciples to sit in this holy place with him. This scene is almost strange to be found in a gospel of straightforwardness and brevity.

Like most of the theophanies in scripture, the event takes place on a mountain. Because of their heights, mountains were often understood as the places nearest heaven, as places of revelations connecting God to humanity.¹ As Jesus and the disciples he chose to take with him come towards the top, the divine revelation occurs. A cloud appears like that of the one found with Moses and Mount Sinai. Jesus’s garments evoke the light of the *Shekinah*, the divine presence perceived as radiance in the pillar of fire found on other mountains, in the sanctuary, and in apocalyptic visions.² Many of the elements in the scene reflect other divine revelations especially in the stories of Moses interacting with God on Mount Sinai.

The focus on the connection with Moses and divine revelation occurs as Jesus also meets with Elijah and Moses on the mountain. Both Elijah and Moses played an important role in Israeli history, and both were revered as prophets. Peter, in his terror, suggests they build three booths alluding to the festival, the Feast of Booths, as he focuses on the promised Sabbath rest of the end-time and this being the moment it begins.³ Peter’s reference is to Elijah’s role as the prophet to speak of the great and terrible day of the Lord and how he connected this concept to the words and prophecy of Moses.

¹ Williamson Jr., Lamar. “Mark.” .” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 158.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 159.

The voice from the cloud speaks, asking the disciples to listen to Jesus, who is the Son of God. Yet when they look up, everything is gone. Jesus stands there alone as if nothing has happened. Thus, the Transfiguration ends.

Application

When we read the story of the Transfiguration, we often emphasize the imagery. We focus on the elements where we see garments which shine and become so white, not even the modern-day producers of bleach could compete. The image of the light surrounding Jesus, Moses, and Elijah easily captures our attention to help us realize this is a significant moment in Jesus's ministry. Yet it is the voice we hear in the passage today which strikes our attention.

Throughout the gospels, there are scenes where God speaks from the heavens. The counsel or prescriptions are not usually very long and occur very quickly. Yet the refrain or theme is the same: "Listen to him (Jesus)." Over and over, the counsel is given to listen to Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord.

While our attention often goes to seeing how Jesus is coming into glory in this passage, our attention might also perk up on how God speaks to us and asks us to listen. What may grab our eyes may not sync with what our ears need to hear. Instead, we might have to do the hard work of listening.

Have you ever deeply listened to someone? Deep listening is not about knowing the next proper thing to say in dinner conversation like how to discuss the plots of a book or movie. Deep listening isn't about memorizing the dictation your boss gives you to repeat in a memo or meeting. Deep listening goes beyond those things; deep listening encompasses hearing the words, discerning bodily movements, and trying to be fully present without pushing an agenda. Deep listening is hard!

I remember learning about deep listening in CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education), which my conference requires for those who are called to ordained ministry. In the program, my cohort and I would discuss deep listening and how it would play out in the conversations we had with those we were in ministry beside. What often struck me is how often you might "miss" someone, meaning they named something and you either misheard them or carried on with your own form of the conversation from your perspective. I learned how deep listening, when done effectively, might even drain you quicker as you learn to hone all your senses to give someone space to process and feel heard.

After these experiences, I've wondered how we have deep listening with God. Often, we hear what we want to hear or see what we want to see. Even when it comes to the Lord, we try to pair things with God which simply make us feel better or give ourselves justification, especially if we've done things we know were not right or just. Many times, we go through life never really listening to God's call and yet God continues to invite us to deeply listen to the voice crying out for us to follow Jesus.

I think we've all seen it play out in our lives. We hear God calling us to forgive, pray, or love, to go where sent, and instead we carry on our merry way. We think we can heal ourselves or get our own agenda through. And yet time and time again, we hear the voice echoing over and over: "This is my Son, whom I

love. Listen to him.” And we are reminded of how Jesus calls us to follow with our words, our actions, and our entire lives.

How have you heard God speaking to you? What are the best practices and spiritual disciplines to listen for God? When was a time you finally listened to God and felt the Holy Spirit move and transform you? Who are people who help you listen to God? What will you do the next time God calls out for you to listen?

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