

**Are You Listening?**  
**Mark 9:2-9**  
**February 19, 2012**

Six days after Jesus first foretells of his crucifixion and resurrection three disciples climb a mountain with him. Peter, James, and John, the inner circle of Jesus' followers, the big three, if you will, witness the transfiguration of Jesus. Three people hear the voice from heaven declare, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." And three people fail to understand; and such is the story of Mark's Gospel. Throughout Mark's Gospel, the disciples fail to understand the true identity and mission of Jesus Christ. Thus it is that, at the transfiguration, Peter, James, and John wanted to enshrine Jesus along with Moses and Elijah, rather than let him continue his earthly ministry. Thus it is that the three did not know what to say for they were terrified. On the way back down the mountain, the Gospel tells us that the disciples questioned what rising from the dead could mean.

In the scene immediately before the transfiguration, Peter would have the nerve to rebuke Jesus for predicting his passion, death, and resurrection; and, just a few verses after the transfiguration, the disciples would argue among themselves about who was the greatest. In the very next chapter, James and John would request of Jesus the place on his right and left. Finally, when Jesus is arrested in Gethsemane, the disciples all desert him and flee. And, lest we think this lack of perception is limited to male disciples, let us not forget that, at the very end of the Gospel, it was the women that were told to tell the others about the resurrection. And what did they do? Mark tells us that they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Yes, my friends, the very voice of God has announced to the disciples that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. The very voice of God has instructed the disciples to listen to him, and the disciples failed, and failed miserably. That's Mark's story of Jesus, and Mark is not kind to the disciples.

Three disciples went up the mountain with Jesus, but I tell you there is a fourth witness to the transfiguration. There is a fourth disciple on the mountain; and that disciple is you, you the reader, the hearer of the Gospel, you, the believer of Good News of Jesus Christ. I tell you this morning that God is speaking to each and every one of us when God says, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." Are you listening? Do *you* understand the true identity and the mission of Jesus Christ; or are you denying or ignoring the resurrection? Do you seek to be humble; or are you vying for a place on the right or left hand of Christ? Will you follow Christ when the going gets tough; or will you desert him and flee?

Ladies and Gentlemen, you are a part of the Gospel story in a very literal sense. In the thirteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, we find a simple four word phrase - it says: "Let the reader understand." (Mark 13:14) You'll never hear it read in church, because it's not included in the Revised Common Lectionary - that scriptural plan of verses to be read in Christian churches on given Sundays, but it's in the Bible. In that verse, the author suggests that, while the disciples may fail to understand the meaning of the Gospel, the reader can indeed understand. So do you understand? Are you listening?

There's another verse in the Gospel of Mark that I also consider hugely important; and it is also not in the lectionary. In the Garden, when Jesus was betrayed, we are told that all the disciples deserted him and fled; but there was a certain young man who followed him wearing nothing but a linen cloth. And, when the authorities caught hold of him, he slipped out of the linen cloth and ran away naked (Mark 14:51-52). Biblical scholars have argued at length about the identity of this naked young man. Who was he? Why did the evangelist include him in the story? Some suggest

that the young man may have been the Evangelist John Mark himself, at a very young age. Others believe that he may have been the same disciple that is referred to in John's Gospel as "the one whom Jesus loved"; but I suggest that this unnamed young man is a place holder if you will, a symbolic representation for you and for me. The young man is the reader. The twelve deserted Jesus and fled, but the young man chose to follow him. In the original Greek, the word for "young man" is *neoniskos*, and that word appears only one other place in the Gospel literature. In Mark's Gospel it is the young man, the *neoniskos*, that announces the resurrection to the women. In Matthew, it's an angel at the tomb. In Luke, it's two men in dazzling white clothes; but, in Mark, it is simple a young man in a white robe. My friends, as readers of the Gospel, we are called to understand, we are called to follow Jesus, even when others desert him and flee; and we are called to announce to the world the Good News of the risen Christ. We are indeed called to be the *neoniskos*.

This is Transfiguration Sunday. Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent; and God has spoken: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him." Are you listening? The observance of Lent dates back to the earliest days of the Christian church. During the forty days of Lent, individual Christians imitate Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days following his baptism. In the early church, Lent was a time when faithful Christians rededicated themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism. Lent is a season for soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock of one's life. It is a season for transformation, yes even transfiguration. When we speak of transfiguration, we usually think of the transfiguration of Jesus as he appeared in dazzling white; but *we* also have the opportunity to be transfigured this Lenten Season. We also have the opportunity to truly enter into a new relationship with Christ. We only need to listen.

So how do we listen? I suggest three ways. The first is by reading the scripture. Nowhere does God speak more clearly than in the writings of the Old and New Testaments. And so I issue my first of three challenges. It is the same challenge that I give to college classes when I teach a course in Gospel literature, except to you I call it a challenge; to them I call it an assignment. Still, I challenge you this week, at the beginning of the Lenten season, to read the Gospel of Mark; but more than that, I challenge you read it in a single sitting, non-stop, and to read it out loud. Now, I strongly recommend that every Christian spend some time everyday reading the Bible, but this is different. Set aside about an hour and forty-five minutes - that's how long it will take to read from Mark 1:1 to Mark 16:8, and read the Gospel as a single coherent story. All too often we only hear the Bible read in church - ten verses at a time. We understand the ten verses, but piecing the entire story together - that's another question. So read the whole story and read it out loud. When we read things out loud, we slow down. We take time to contemplate what we are reading. We involve more of our senses. The Apostle Paul tells us that faith comes through *hearing*; and spiritual writer and lecturer Kathleen Norris reminds her audiences that language is primarily an aural experience. Understanding frequently comes through hearing far more readily than through reading. So it is that I encourage people to read scripture out loud. It would be absolutely fantastic if your entire family would gather together to read the Gospel; and yes, it's okay if you take turns reading aloud while others read it silently. But, if your family will not cooperate or if you're a single person family, find a secluded space and spend an hour and forty-five minutes with your Bible. Read the Gospel of Mark. Within that Gospel search for the true identity and mission of Jesus; and search for the ways that you, the reader, fit into the story, the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The second way we listen to Jesus is through prayer. And so I suggest that you set a time everyday for prayer and reflection. This is more than the routine prayers at dinner or bed time. As

important as those are, I'm suggesting that you set aside an additional quiet time of ten or fifteen minutes every day to *listen to God*. During this time, enter into conversation with God. Enter into a relationship with God. Pray that God will lead you, that God will guide you, that, in the words of the song, God will truly melt you, mold you, fill you, use you. Pray for direction and discernment. Then sit there in silence and listen. Listen as God speaks to your heart. Listen to the voice of God. What is God saying to you? Where is God calling you? I am fully convinced that God has a purpose for every life he puts on this earth. It's up to us to find that purpose and to live that purpose. What does it mean for you personally to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world? You've read the Gospel. Now pray about it. Pray about it every day during this Lenten season. Reflect on it. Contemplate it. You might even write about it. Search out God's call on your life and live that life, be the person that God calls you to be.

That brings me to the third challenge for this Lenten season. You have read the Gospel. You are regularly praying about the Gospel, and your role in the Good News. Now it's time to respond. It's time to be in service. One of the strengths of this church, one of the things that made me feel good about coming to this church was its mission focus. This church knows what it means to reach out to those in need; and I praise God for that. I have mentioned before our amazing food distribution program. Then there is the community meal; and our volunteer meal preparation at Laura's Home. Our church did a wonderful job supporting the mission trip to Honduras; and the annual youth mission work trip is hugely successful because of the prayerful, personal, and financial support of the members of this church. I'm pleased to say that service and volunteer efforts have become an important part of teenage life. Scholarships are sometimes based on service; and college admission officers consider the volunteer work of applicants; but our youth mission trip is not simply an opportunity for our youth earn points toward future academic success. As important as that is, it's even more important that our youth experience the joy of serving others in the name of Jesus Christ, the joy of spreading God's love by doing, by helping, by serving God's people. As Christians, we have a biblical mandate to house the homeless, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned. So where is Christ calling you?

My friends, the opportunity to share God's love never ends. You may be homebound, but you can still pick up the phone and call a friend or neighbor or fellow church member to share God's love; and, you can always pray for those in need. You might be flat on your back in a hospital bed; but you can still share God's love with your roommate, visitors, doctors, nurses - all those with whom you come in contact. Even when we're literally knocking on death's door, we can share God's love. I've personally seen it. Some of the most wonderful testimonies of faith that I have ever heard have come from those who were at the very end of their earthly lives; and I pray that, when that time come for me, I may face the future with the love and the joy that I have witnessed in such people. Whether you're five years old or ninety-five years old, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're in perfect health, or facing serious illness, it matters not. God has a plan for your life. God has a plan for each of us, and we are called to respond.

On a high mountain in the Galilean countryside, Jesus was transfigured. His clothes became dazzling white. He shined as true light shining forth into a dark world. He truly became the ultimate expression of God's love shining in the wilderness. Is the love of Christ shining in your life?

This Lenten season you too can be transfigured. This Lenten season, listen to Christ. Take the time to study the scriptures. Take the time to place yourself within the scriptures, for you have a part to play in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

This Lenten season, take time to pray. Take time to establish a relationship with the living Christ. Take time to listen to Christ's call in your life. And finally, this Lenten season, resolve to respond. Resolve to truly live the Gospel in the world. This might mean helping someone in need. It might mean spending some extra time in volunteer service, or it might mean making a career change or a major change in your life. Have the courage to respond, knowing that the living Christ goes with you in all you do.

God said, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Are you listening?

Let us pray. . .

Most holy Lord, help us to listen to you. Help us to personally share in the Good News of your great love. Help us to establish an ever closer relationship with you; and, help us to live out of that relationship, to lead the lives that you would have us lead, to be the people that you would have us be, to truly live the Gospel in thought, in word, and in deed. Amen.

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