

Listening to Jesus
Mark 9:2-9
February 11, 2018 – Transfiguration Sunday

We've said a lot in the past weeks about the church year that begins with Advent and about the fact that we are now in the year of the Gospel of Mark. Well, within the church year, the Sunday before Lent is Transfiguration Sunday; and the Transfiguration is a special event in the Gospel of Mark and in the life of the Church.

First, I note that the Transfiguration happens exactly half-way through the Gospel, and it marks a dramatic change in focus. Everything before the transfiguration happens in Galilee – healings and teachings and signs of the inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God, and we'll hear a good deal more about all of that as our year progresses. But now, after the transfiguration, Jesus sets his sights on Jerusalem. Jesus is done with the talking and the teaching. It's time to directly confront the Jewish establishment, the Jewish legalism, and the exclusive nature of first century culture. So after the transfiguration, Jesus heads to Jerusalem; and we know what that means: Jesus is heading to Calvary; Jesus is heading to crucifixion; to death on a cross. Of course, as Christians, we know that the cross did not have the final say, because after crucifixion comes resurrection, and a whole new story. But how appropriate it is that the transfiguration paves the way into Lent.

Now, I was not on the mountain with Peter and James and John, those privileged three, those whom we might call the inner circle of Jesus disciples. I don't know exactly what it is that they experienced. But, as I said a couple weeks ago, the Gospel was not strictly written for the first century audience. It was also written for you and for me. And so I ask, what does the transfiguration say to us, to you and to me today. Friends, these eight short verses are packed with information for us.

First and foremost, the transfiguration truly defines who Jesus was. Remember, there's no birth narrative in Mark. There's no angel in Mark telling Mary what Jesus will do or telling Joseph how Jesus will save his people from their sins. But Jesus climbed a mountain and he was transfigured. His clothes became dazzling white. The holiness of Jesus, the purity of Jesus, the divinity of Jesus shined forth. Suddenly, he was not just a man. He was a very special man.

And then he's seen speaking with two characters from the past – Moses and Elijah. Once again, I don't know what kind of embodiment these two spirits had or how this conversation took place. But Moses and Elijah... Tradition tells us that Moses gave us the Law; Moses told the Jewish people how to live; Moses led the Jewish people from slavery to freedom. And Elijah... Elijah was the first of the great prophets. Elijah called a sinful Israel back into relationship with God.

Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets, and Jesus came to fulfill the law and to establish the ultimate relationship between God and humanity.

So we've got this wonderful conference going on between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. And those three guys, Peter, James, and John, really don't know what to make of all this. And Peter, being Peter, can't just stand and take it all in. No Peter rushes forward. (You know that statement: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread"? As we go through this year, watch out for Peter. Peter is always rushing in.) So Peter rushes in, and says, "Lord let us build three dwellings, three palaces if you will, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. It was a few years back, that I made the statement on Transfiguration Sunday, that Peter wanted to put God in a box.

How often do we want to put God in a box? How often are we different people in church than out in the world? How often do we speak of following Jesus while we're in this space; but, when we get out there, we seek to follow the ways of our culture. Heaven forbid we should be labeled as counter-cultural, or a religious fanatic, or unpatriotic because we put the Gospel of Jesus Christ before the ways of the world. Yes, I believe that, all too often, many of us, myself included, are guilty of trying to put God, or at least the life that God has called us to lead in a box.

So Peter suggests building a box, a home, or a palace for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. But before anything could happen, a cloud overshadowed them. And then, a voice was heard from heaven: "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him?" Remember me saying the transfiguration is about defining who Jesus is. The clothes of dazzling white and the meeting with Moses and Elijah both lead up to this statement: "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him." And, once again, friends, that's not just a statement for Peter and James and John; and that's not just a statement for Mark's first century readers. That's a statement for you and for me. "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him."

So let me ask again, "Are we listening?" This is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls us to repent, to turn around, to follow in the light of God's love, and to believe the Good News. Are we listening?

I don't think the people in Washington are listening. I simply don't see a lot of evidence that their concern is for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the stranger, or the foreigner as much as their concern is for the latest stock report. I don't think the people in Hollywood are listening when sex and violence and vulgarity have become primary forms of entertainment. I'm not sure business executives are listening when CEO's are earning literally hundreds of times what their line workers are earning. Are you and I listening? Is the church listening? I truly believe that sometimes, the answer to that is "Yes," and I confess for the church and for myself personally that sometimes the answer is "No."

Last Monday evening it was my privilege to take part in a conversation on “The Way Forward” as the United Methodist Church struggles with disciplinary language around sexual orientation. I think I understand where those who say that homosexuality is contrary to Christian teachings get those ideas. They come from Paul, and I believe from a misinterpretation of Paul; and they come from the Book of Leviticus and a culture that is over three thousand year old. I can tell you absolutely, positively, they do not come from Jesus Christ. I’ve said it before, if Jesus was about anything, he was about inclusiveness. I ask for your continued prayers as our church continues to struggle with this issue as we seek to discern God’s will.

But homosexuality is only one issue. Are you aware that less than five percent of the pulpits in your larger churches are held by women. Women in minister repeatedly tell me that the “glass ceiling” still exists in the church. I do believe we are making progress on this front, but the progress is slow.

I have also spoken before about issues of race. Today, let me simply say that I believe that white privilege is very real. I’m not sure if the white supremacy groups are growing in recent years or if they have just been emboldened to come out of the woodwork. But, I am deeply troubled by their rhetoric and by the fact that they appear to have a growing audience. Again, I have witnessed significant progress within our denomination on racial issues, but we still have a lot of work to do.

Are we listening to Jesus? Having listed these challenges, I must tell you that one of the reasons I’m a United Methodist is because I believe our denomination and our church does listen to Jesus. I am especially pleased with the work of the United Methodist Committee on Relief or UMCOR. If a disaster strikes anywhere in the world, UMCOR responds with volunteers, with food and supplies, with financial support, and with spiritual support. UMCOR works quietly. You’ll not see an UMCOR truck at disaster sights; but it’s a good bet that the volunteers working there are UMCOR volunteers, and the supplies came from places like the Midwest Mission Distribution Center (MMDC) which our January Penny Sunday helped support. Yes, when disaster strikes, your church and your denomination responds, listening to Jesus, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless.

Our District and our Conference have been majorly involved in mission work in Haiti, working in both a school and a hospital there. We have regular Volunteers In Mission or VIM groups traveling to Haiti to share the love of God. In fact, a tea, from our conference left yesterday for Haiti. I have friends on that team; and we prayed for them this morning.

Our Conference is also a major supporter of Africa University and the Old Mutari Mission and Orphanage in Zimbabwe. Again volunteers travel to Africa to

work in the Orphanage or help with building projects or even teach at Africa University. You may remember that we had a guest speaker from Africa University here at our church about a year and a half ago.

Here at home, our church and our denomination support colleges, hospitals, children's homes, and retirements centers. We provide scholarship help so more youth can attend college, we support mission centers to serve and educate the poor, and the list goes on.

So are we listening to Jesus? Like so many things, the answer is Yes and No. On the personal level as well as the communal level, the answer is Yes and No. Indeed, God loves the "Yes" and we really need to make progress on the "No." Lent begins on Wednesday. This year your church is giving out these Lenten Devotionals called "Living the Gospel Life." The purpose of this book is to help each of us make progress on the "No."

God said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; Listen to him." We are called to listen to Jesus. This Lent may we concentrate on listening more fully, responding more eagerly, and sharing more lovingly, as we walk the path that Jesus would have us walk.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,
You speak to us daily,
So open our ears to listen
and open our hearts,
that we may respond with words and actions,
with love and joy and peace.
Amen.

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