

Time to Listen

By
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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

The moment of Jesus' transfiguration is a time of great mystery and meaning. It's a brief account, described in three of the gospels and referenced in a New Testament letter, too, that recalls the day Jesus takes three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—up a mountain. Soon after their arrival, his appearance is transformed as Jesus' face begins to shine and his clothes become brilliantly white. As the three men look on in amazement, two figures from Israel's past—Moses, the giver of the law, and Elijah, the great prophet of God—appear with Jesus.

Peter, the disciple who is often the first to speak amidst confusing or unsettling events, says, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." We don't know how Peter pieced together the identity of those who stood with Jesus. Those two ancestors in the faith walked the earth, respectively, thirteen and nine centuries before that appearance on the mountain. There were no photos available, and Jesus makes no introductions either, yet Peter identifies them right away and offers to build some kind of dwelling. Nor are we told why he made that offer. Some have suggested he wanted the experience to last and delay the kind of suffering Jesus had told them was to come. Others suspect Peter was simply babbling on, not knowing what to make of what he was seeing.

Whatever his reasoning, while Peter is still talking, a cloud surrounds the assembly, and a voice declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" The disciples fall to the ground in fear and cover their heads. Moments later, Jesus walks over and touches them. "Get up and do not be afraid," he says. When the three men look up, only Jesus remains as Moses and Elijah have departed. The group begins to walk down the mountain with instructions from their teacher not to tell anyone about those events until after the resurrection.

It is a moment with all kinds of significance as it offers a clear sign of Jesus' divinity and the connection of his ministry with what God had done

in the Old Testament. It provides a basis for those who would call Jesus the new Moses, too, for just as that ancestor had ascended a mountain to receive the law of God and found his face shining upon his return, so does Jesus take his followers up a mountain, is transfigured, and reveals an even greater authority.

Yet as I pondered that scene again in recent days, I found myself drawn to the final words from God on that day. The only other time God is heard to speak in Matthew's gospel occurred at the moment of Jesus' baptism when that same voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (3:17). Here, near the end of Jesus' ministry, God begins with virtually the same words yet concludes with the telling command "Listen to him!"

That is the call of our Maker to those who first heard it and those who gather two millennia later. It was meant for Peter, discussing a building project in the first century, and for us who have gathered on this Transfiguration Sunday in the twenty-first century. In it, God urges those first disciples to pay careful attention to the words that Jesus will speak as they near and move through the final events in Jerusalem. I believe he is saying the same thing to us as we navigate challenging debates that often emanate from our nation's capital, too.

I suspect this congregation has come to realize that I am not one who preaches political sermons. I have no criticism of preachers who do, but that is not my usual approach. I do keep up with events in D.C. and, to a lesser degree, in Harrisburg and internationally. I am happy to offer my perspective and hear yours should the topic come up in conversation, but it is rare for such topics to stand at the center of one of my sermons.

At the same time, I affirm one of the central teachings of the Protestant tradition that God is sovereign over all aspects of creation—what happens in our faith communities and the halls of power, in our neighborhood and

workplace, in our homes and schools, in our courtrooms and city streets. We cannot compartmentalize the call of God only to what happens in these walls, as our faith speaks to and God is concerned about all of life.

Still, it seems to me that much of the conversation in our land has become so politicized that to speak to any issue being debated—immigration or ICE, gun safety or vaccines, climate change or the place of the U.S. on the world stage—automatically puts the speaker in one camp or the other; as a full supporter of the Administration or as one already planning for the next election. That strikes me as too limiting, as I firmly believe that our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is higher than that. Thus, I tend to speak to such matters from a different perspective.

After the Session approved my hiring as your Interim Senior Pastor, but before beginning, I watched most of your services online. There was a stretch of time when each of my now colleagues took a turn in the pulpit. It became clear to me what you already knew, namely that each of them, among their many other talents, is a gifted preacher. It was during a sermon in November that Rebecca spoke about the work of an Interim Senior Pastor. Among other things, she anticipated that much of my time with you would be one of teaching about or reminding you of things Jesus said. She had not asked me if that would be a priority, but she was right, as my sermons arise from things Jesus said or approaches consistent with his instruction.

Thus, in recent weeks, one homily grew out of the first words from God's son found in Scripture, recalling when a 12-year-old found by his frantic parents in the Temple said, "Did you not know I must be in my Father's house?" Over the following Sundays, we pondered his first Biblical words as an adult, telling the Tempter "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" and Jesus' first sermon on a Friday evening in the synagogue where he had been raised, and he declared "Truly, I tell you no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." During the Sundays of Lent, our focus will

arise from an extended narrative involving his friend Lazarus, including the moment Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

In taking that approach, I seek to build upon the questions posed when you joined this body of faith. I’m not sure exactly which queries are posed at Bryn Mawr, but there is relative consistency among Presbyterian congregations. For after affirming your intention to turn from sin and evil in the world, you were asked, “Who is your Lord and Savior?” The response? “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.” The next question is, “Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?” The reply? “I will, with God’s help.”

Certainly, there are all kinds of layers in meaning being articulated when one affirms Christ as Lord and Savior and when one declares a commitment to be his disciple. Yet at least part of what those answers proclaim is an articulated resolve to listen to him and follow his instruction as best we can. Thus, on this Transfiguration Sunday, when the strain in our national and personal conversations is apparent, let me remind you of some of what Jesus said.

As we have committed ourselves to following one who said, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” We have affirmed our loyalty to one who said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy;” the same one who said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” We have declared our intention to be a disciple of one who said, “Where your treasures are, there will your heart be also,” and one who offered that “I have come not to be served, but to serve.”

We have declared our reliance upon the one who, amidst unsettled times long ago, told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” We have chosen to commit our lives to the one who, in response to a parable, was asked, ““Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave

you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?” In reply, Jesus said, “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” And we have dedicated our best energies to the one whose final words in Matthew are “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Certainly, choosing to listen first to Jesus’ words will not mean that our understanding or conclusions about political matters or other challenging issues will be the same. We remain unique people, and hearing the same words from the same Lord does not guarantee the same conclusions. Furthermore, an argument can be made that today’s Christians have even more voices and certainly more instantaneous voices than did individuals of the not-so-distant past have to consider, as podcasts and social media, commentators, and AI give us access to information and perspectives that previous generations did not.

It is more complicated today than for our ancestors in the faith, and yet part of the Christian life has always been one of discerning which voices will shape our response and which ones we will ignore. Which ones will guide us, and which ones are just noise? We will not be perfect in sorting that out; not one of us. Yet all who have professed faith in Christ have affirmed the voice that is to be our starting point in all matters.

Which means that on this Transfiguration Sunday, we hear our Maker say to Republicans and Democrats, Independents and Libertarians: “Listen to him!” God says to Boomers and Millennials, to the Greatest Generation and Gen Xers, to the Silent Generation and Generation Alpha, and all others in between: “Listen to him!” And our creator says to devotees of Fox News and MSNBC, to LGBTQ+ and straight individuals, to cis-gender and gender fluid, to adults and teens and children: “Listen to him!” As that remains our starting point in all matters that face us as individuals and as a congregation, as a nation, and as citizens of the world.

Thus, on this day, I invite you to affirm once again the primacy of his words for the simple reason that Jesus alone can best lead us still to hear and understand and follow God's will.