

March 2, 2003
Transfiguration Sunday
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Listening to Jesus

Mark 9:2-9 *Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*

I greet you this morning with a grateful heart and a spirit stirred by what lies ahead as we live together the life of listening to the living Christ!

That is what I want to talk about this first Sunday of my ministry with you—listening to Jesus. For we are part of a world that makes it difficult to listen to Christ, the Prince of Peace and the embodiment of God's compassion. As Christ's own community, we become so distracted by the siren voices of consumerism, nationalism, militarism, and a material affluence that leaves us spiritually impoverished. We drift from the practices that can keep us attuned to the Voice that speaks of life. We become like the sheep in John's gospel (chapter 10), which do not recognize the Good Shepherd's voice. And not listening, they do not follow, and not following, they become lost. We are the community of Christ, those who are trying to listen to the Good Shepherd's voice so that he can lead us to the good grass of God's kingdom and the restorative waters of peace and well being for all God's children.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, when we hear this story of Jesus' dazzling manifestation to his disciples. Today is also the threshold of Lent, a season for reflecting on Christ's suffering love, for examining ourselves in light of the grace and call of God, a season for renewing those spiritual practices that keep us close to Christ and the transforming power of God's love. Today we stand on the mountaintop of the Transfiguration, the experience of Christ in whom God is fully manifest to us. Then we will descend to the level plain of following him amid the daily struggles, pains, and opportunities of life.

Three disciples go up with Jesus to a mountaintop. He is transfigured before their eyes, illuminated with a heavenly glow, a divine aura. Moses and Elijah show up to give heavyweight historical and theological confirmation of Jesus. The Law and the Prophets bear witness to him. It is an impressive show!

This is a spiritual high point, one of those moments when the full meaning, purpose, and glory of life are unveiled before us and within us. It is the original "mountaintop experience." Faith is confirmed in the very midst of struggle, pain, and fear. God is no longer an idea or piece of doctrine, but a Reality welling up in our souls, which we perceive all around us and in us. We see the dazzling and joyous truth of God's love manifest in Christ. These are moments when we touch what is eternal, what is ultimate.

Wouldn't it be nice if these moments would last forever, wiping away all doubt, struggle, and fear? What a "downer" it was for me as a teenager to return home from a week at Craig Springs, the Disciples of Christ church camp here in Virginia! Being so immersed in God's creation, growing so close to other young people and caring adults in

a fellowship of sharing, trust, and love, sensing so strongly God's reality and Christ's exciting call to give myself to the adventure of following him. Like Peter, I wanted to build a booth, a shrine, something that would make the impermanent permanent. Yet there was always the re-entry period, the challenge of taking what I had learned and experienced on the "mountaintop" and live it out on the plain of everyday life. This is the movement from "religious experience" to the life of faith, from touching the ultimate to living in the daily world of the penultimate.

Peter is uncomfortable. He feels compelled to speak about the unspeakable, and it comes out rather silly: "Teacher, isn't it nice to be here!" Thomas Merton wrote somewhere, perhaps in his book on the Cistercian life, The Waters of Siloe, that when a monk is asked about prayer and the spiritual life, he will often become speechless, unable to express what is most real, intimate, and sacred. Moments of revelation do come to us, when we sense the sacred depths of life and the mystery of God's presence in Christ. These experiences of transfiguration can give us the gift of an awed silence in the soul. We learn to be like Mary in the birth stories, who "contemplated all these things in her heart." This is a bright and illuminating secret in our deepest self, preserving in us a sense of the Holy and the holiness of life. Howard Thurman called this the establishing of an "Island of Peace within our soul."

A cloud envelops the disciples, and from it comes a voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" All these special effects have set the stage for this one message: LISTEN TO HIM! It is all about listening to Jesus. In the midst of this society and world, so distracting, fear producing, and violence instilling, so many voices clamoring around us and in us, here is the call to listen to the one true voice of the Good Shepherd, and in that voice to hear the sound of Life, the very voice of God.

The word "listen" that Mark uses is full of meaning. It is not just turning our ears toward a sound. It is listening with a desire to understand, to know deeply not only the truth of what is said but also the one who is saying it. It is a listening that creates a relationship with Jesus, and through Jesus, with God. And it is a listening that includes following. To listen to Jesus is to follow him with our lives, to do what he is speaking, to let Christ, the living Incarnate Word, become incarnate in every aspect of our lives.

Jesus leads the disciples back down to the level plain of daily life. That is where they are to continue listening to him, following him, becoming a community in which his life and truth are manifest. The journey continues, the journey that leads to new life for the disciples themselves and, through them, for the world.

Today I think back over my own journey, a journey that has led now to this place and to you, to share with you our individual and corporate journeys of listening to Jesus. A covenant community that for nearly fifty years has held to a clear, simple, and vital vision of the church as a disciplined and mission-oriented community. A community listening to the call of Christ to be on the inward journey of personal transformation and the outward journey of Christ's call to relieve each other's and the world's suffering, to be and to do the Good News of God's redeeming love.

My journey has been personal and individual, but always the fruit of community and the search for community. Growing up in the church, with my father being a minister, I was drawn to that great and compelling mystery of God in which I could hear the voice calling me to “listen to Jesus.” Had I not felt the call to be a spiritual leader in a community of faith, I would still have been on that same journey. And though I have spent nearly thirty years in my vocation as a pastor, I have, at the same time, been continually on the personal journey of listening to Jesus.

My greatest joy and my greatest discouragement have been found in this community of faith that has nurtured me. Still there is nothing more hope-giving to me than the community of disciples, giving themselves to Christ in daily practice, and to one another in mutual love; a disciplined, covenant community, relying not on its own merit or strength but on the enormous and dazzling grace of God’s love manifest in Christ.

In my young adulthood, I dreamed at times of becoming a monk! Kaye still thinks that I lapse into that dream! The only examples of committed faith communities I knew about were found in monasteries. But I also knew about Martin Luther, who had left the monastery at Erfurt, Germany, convinced that the Christian life was to be lived out within the mundanities and complexities of the world. The ministry was not for special people called to the rarified environment of the monastery but for all people called to live out their faith in the world. Just after seminary, I became aware of a Catholic community, the Sisters of Loretto, who welcomed men and Protestants and non-Christians who shared the values and vision of their vowed community. Over the twenty years of association with Loretto and now being a Co-Member of that community, I believe more than ever in the great need for committed servant communities of Jesus.

So I have come to be with you, a community that has been always within the peripheral vision of my soul, a community that has held to that simple, yet demanding vision of what it means to be persons and a community organized around one thing: Listening to Jesus. Amid the trends and fads, the anxieties and fears, you are a community that keeps listening to Jesus and seeking to obey. You are what the world and the church needs, what we all need in order to grow into the fullness and the depth of life as God created it. I come with a commitment to this vision and this structure of life in covenant with God through Christ. I come with a commitment to use my gifts to help persons listen to and follow that mysterious, profound call in their lives. I come with a desire to find ways of articulating and sharing this vision with others, particularly young people, that they might find in their own souls a resonance to the voice that calls us from death to life, the voice that calls us home, that tell us we belong to the universe and the God who made it, the voice that calls us into partnership in the on-going transformation of life. There will be many things to consider, discuss, and share, matters to decide, tasks to which we will give ourselves. But if we do nothing else together for whatever years God joins us, may it be this desire, this effort, this life together of listening to Jesus, and endeavoring with all the dimensions and resources of our lives to follow.

Let us pray:

O God, may your living Word speak within our souls and our community here, awakening us to life and to love. Grant us quiet and peaceful spirits, so that we may hear, receive, understand, and do what you speak to us in Christ. Speak, O God, for we are listening. Through Christ, our savior and lord, we pray. Amen.