

February 6, 2005/The Transfiguration of Jesus
David L. Edwards

Listening to Jesus

2 Peter 1:16-21 *You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

Matthew 17:1-9 *...and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"*

On this last Sunday after Epiphany the gospel reading is traditionally the story of Jesus' transfiguration. It is the turning point in the gospel story. From here Jesus moves swiftly toward Jerusalem where his life of faithfulness to God will culminate in a confrontation with the religious and political powers of his day. There he will be abandoned even by those who most proclaimed their love for him. There he will die as an outcast and a criminal, not a successful and influential religious leader. And all of this will come to be seen as the outpouring of God's love upon the world, and the rebirth of life and faith through God's power of resurrection.

But that's getting ahead of our story!

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on an unnamed mountain. While there, Jesus is "transfigured before them." His face shines, as did Moses' when he went up Mt. Sinai to meet with God. His clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah—representing the law and the prophets of Israel—appear with him as a confirmation of Jesus' authority.

Peter is uncomfortable in the presence of things he doesn't understand. So he does what many of us do when we don't know what to say—we talk! "Oh, it's so nice to be here, Jesus. I mean, with you and Moses and Elijah and all. And, by the way, you're looking spectacular! Let's capture the moment. Let's build booths and make this a sacred site and maybe just stay here."

But Peter's babbling is interrupted as a bright cloud envelops them all, and out of the cloud comes a voice. It is the same voice as at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Then the cloud disappears. Moses and Elijah disappear. The shining face is back to normal. The clothes don't sparkle anymore. The disciples have collapsed in fear. So Jesus goes over, gives them an assuring touch, and tells them not to be afraid. As they go back down the mountain, Jesus tells them to keep quiet about it until "after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

I think that the center of the story is not the mountain, the shining face and clothes, Moses and Elijah, or even the bright cloud. All of that sets the stage for what God says to the disciples and to us: Listen to him! Listen to Jesus!

The problem is that the disciples have not been listening. They've not really heard what Jesus has been teaching them about life and faith. Their minds are always full of their own ideas, expectations, and hopes. They want Jesus to give them special status in this kingdom he keeps talking about. He tells them that the first will be last and the last will be first. Just before this mountaintop experience, Jesus told the disciples that the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem, be rejected, killed, and raised on the third day. Peter objects because it sounds like weakness and defeatism. Jesus upbraids Peter, tells him he is getting in God's way with an attitude like that. Then Jesus goes on to say that all who follow him must take up their cross of faithfulness, too. If they want to save their lives, they must let go of them. If they are trying to gain the world, they will forfeit their lives. The disciples aren't really listening, really getting it.

That is why the centerpiece of this story is: Listen to him! Listening to Jesus is our first and on-going work as his disciples and as his community. The very word "obedience" has as its root meaning "to listen." To follow Jesus is to listen to him, then to do what we hear. But listening is hard for us. To listen we have to learn silence, to cultivate an inner life that is quiet, open, and responsive. Silence is rare in today's world, in our culture, even in the church. We fill up silence with all sorts of distractions. We feel compelled to talk, to socialize, to express ourselves, even when we don't know exactly what we want to say or what we are talking about. We are like Peter up on the mountain that day. We are surrounded by dazzling mysteries and sacredness, but we are so distracted we don't see it.

Silence and inner listening are not alien to us as human beings. They are built into our spiritual nature. Listen to these words from Native Americans, who have a far older and less corrupted spirituality than our own:

Excessive manners were put down as insincere, and the constant talker was considered rude and thoughtless. Conversation was never begun at once, nor in a hurried manner. No one was quick with a question, no matter how important and no one was pressed for an answer. A pause giving time for thought was the truly courteous way of beginning and conducting a conversation. Silence was meaningful with the Lakota. Also, in the midst of sorrow, sickness, and death, or misfortune of any kind, and in the presence of the notable and great, silence was the mark of respect. More powerful than words was silence with the Lakota. (Standing Bear, Oglala Lakota)

If you ask [the first American]: “What is silence?” he will answer: “It is the Great Mystery!” “The holy silence is [God’s] voice!” If you ask: “What are the fruits of silence?” he will say: “They are self-control, true courage or endurance, patience, dignity, and reverence.” Silence is the cornerstone of character.

(Ohiyesa)

Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they’ll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don’t listen. They never learned to listen to the Indians so I don’t suppose they’ll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit.

(Walking Buffalo, Stoney)

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Silence is the first step in the spiritual journey and its oasis all along the way. Cultivating our capacity for inward silence, we make room within ourselves for the voice of God and the spirit of Christ. Psalm 46 says: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Be quiet. Stop struggling. Listen. And you will become aware of God’s presence and voice in all creation and in your own heart.

As we begin to practice inward silence, we become aware of many voices that are not the voice of Christ, the voice of God. Voices telling us that we are worthless or incapable or weak; that our purpose in life is to consume, gain power over others, or find security by seeking only our own well being; that the world is an object for our use and misuse, not the wondrous and delicately woven creation to which our own lives are integrally bound; that those who are different from us in race, religion, or social status are inferior or have nothing to teach us. There are the voices of our fears and hurts and unresolved conflicts. There are voices that tell us that silence, prayer, inner listening are a waste of time and the only thing that matters is action, getting things done. The voices come from our parents, our teachers, our political and religious leaders.

As we practice silence and inner listening, we begin to identify these voices and understand the ways they have affected us. These other voices then begin to lose their hold on us, grow fainter, and we begin to hear the voice of our own heart. And when that begins to happen, we are ready to listen to God our creator and to Christ who manifests our true humanity. Silence is not a withdrawal from life. It is the doorway to what is really real. It is waking up.

I like very much these words in our reading from 2 Peter for today: *You will do well to be attentive to this [message about Jesus Christ] as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and*

the morning star rises in your hearts. The writer may have meant the so-called second coming of Christ, or the great day of the Lord. But could it not also mean the day that dawns for us when we wake up to God, when all the other voices recede into the background, and we hear daily God's voice in our hearts speaking to us of the sacredness of our own lives, of the creation in which we live, and of the life we share together? I think that this is the rebirth that is meant by Christ and by other religious traditions, being "born anew."

Practicing silence does not mean that we never talk, laugh, sing, have a good time, or express our anger or hurt. It only means that our outward expressions come from an inner life that is becoming more authentic, peaceful, and grounded in who we really are and our relationship to God.

The season of Lent begins this week and continues until Holy Week and Easter. At the start, we hear Jesus' puzzling instructions to the disciples to say nothing about the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. Maybe this is a good Lenten spiritual practice. Years ago I read an interview with Henri Matisse, the famous painter. When asked what he thought about artists who talk about their work, he made a scissors-like motion toward his tongue: "They should have their tongues cut out!" He was more interested in artists doing their work than talking about it. Maybe the discipline of Lent is that of a listening silence. Jesus has been and is today misrepresented in many ways by Christians and Christianity. Maybe we need to cease talking about who we think Jesus is and listen intently as he tells us who he is and what he is calling us to be and do. The practice of daily times of silence and prayer can be taken up with a new commitment during this season. As we do this, we find that the silence and inner listening that happens in those particular times begins to carry through the rest of the day. We can be in the midst of a very busy schedule or a noisy place bustling with people and still be inwardly quiet and listening. But it takes practice, or discipline.

Cultivating silence and inward listening, we can find a more peaceful approach to living, so that we are not caught up in the anxiousness and frenetic pace around us. But more importantly, we become increasingly attuned to our own lives and what we are to do with them. We become more purposeful and less diffused because of the multitude of other voices that pull us this way and that. We become more sensitive to the voice of God in Christ, who teaches us the way of life. The way of forgiveness. The way of humility. The way of non-violence in thought, word, and action. The way of compassion and true justice. The way of thankfulness and joy. The way of listening to God all day, every day of our lives.