

## Listening to Jesus

2 Corinthians 4:5-10

*For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

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!"*

Today is a very meaningful Sunday in the flow of the church year. It is the last Sunday in the Season after Epiphany, a season that bridges Christmas and Lent/Easter. The season is full of images of light, particularly God's light coming to dwell with us in Jesus. Light images are present in our readings this morning from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians and Mark's gospel. The light of God shining in our hearts so that we see God's glory in Jesus. And the light of Jesus' countenance on the Mount of Transfiguration, when the disciples see him for who he really is.

Today is also the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Lent is a season for turning our attention to following Jesus on the path of discipleship today, the path that leads to self-giving and to the new life brought to Jesus and to us by God's power of resurrection.

These two themes or images come together on this Sunday—the illuminating light of God in Jesus and in us as we look to Jesus, and the life of discipleship as we live as those in whom the light of God in Jesus shines.

Jesus takes three disciples up a mountain. It is about mid-way through Jesus' ministry. From here on, Jesus turns toward Jerusalem and confrontation with the political and religious power structures. Increasingly Jesus will suffer the consequences of single-minded faithfulness to God's kingdom instead of the kingdoms of the world. But now Jesus takes Peter, James and John on a little hike. On top of the mountain, Jesus is "transfigured." He becomes a dazzling presence before their eyes. Elijah and Moses appear and have a conversation with Jesus. It's quite a scene—Jesus radiating with a divine glow, Elijah and Moses lending the confirmation of the whole heritage of Judaism to Jesus' identity as messiah. It is a high moment, a mountaintop experience, literally and spiritually.

Peter can't keep quiet, however. He always seems compelled to talk. Some folks just can't keep quiet in the presence of the sacred. Some things, some experiences simply don't need to be talked about but received in reverent silence. Rabbi, he says, it's so nice to be here on this mountain,

with you shining with all that light. Let's build some booths for the three of you. Let's capture this moment. Let's stay here forever. The text makes it clear that Peter is just filling the air with nervous chatter, for it says, "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified."

Then a cloud envelops them and a voice speaks from the cloud: This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him! That's been the problem. The disciples have not been listening to Jesus. Just prior to this scene, Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the messiah, made the "good confession"—You are the messiah, the Christ! But in the next moment, he climbed all over Jesus for talking about the way of suffering and rejection and death—all that defeatist stuff! Jesus scolded him thoroughly, called him Satan, and told him to get out of his way. Just after this mountaintop experience, this high moment of spiritual awareness, when you think there could be no more missing of the point, the disciples get into an argument about which of them is the greatest. As we read the gospels, Mark in particular, the disciples are always getting it wrong, misunderstanding what Jesus is really about. They just aren't getting it. They aren't listening.

The whole purpose of that mountaintop scene is to set the stage for the voice that sounds out like a megaphone—Listen to him! The word listen comes from the same word as obedience. To obey means to listen and then do what we hear. Obedience, the way we live, begins with listening. It means listening deeply to God, to Jesus, to our own hearts, so that then we are able to live out of what we hear. On Wednesdays we are studying together Parker Palmer's book LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK. He's saying that we find our true vocation in life, our true calling, not by doing what everyone and everything around us tells we should do, but by listening to our own hearts, to the nature of our own lives as God uniquely made us. That's what it means to listen in this deep way. If we are doing that, then we will live in the ways that the world needs us to live.

Jesus is shining with the light and truth of God. He is the embodiment of what it means to live as a true human being as God made us to be and to live. The transfiguration can be any moment when we see Jesus for who he really is, when he is confirmed for us as the one who shows us the way. These are the high moments of our spiritual lives when, from time to time, we get a glimpse of our own true nature as we look at the light of God shining in Jesus, as Paul puts it.

But we are not meant to live on the mountaintop. We must go down the mountain again, into the ordinary daily affairs and challenges and struggles of life. That is where we are to live out the truth we know in Jesus, the truth of our own lives. The mountaintop moment vanishes quickly, and the disciples are alone with Jesus again. As they walk down the mountain, Jesus gives them a strange order: Don't say a word about this to anyone! Not until the Son of Man is raised from death. Why, the first thing we want to do is tell everyone about this wonderful spiritual

experience we've had! Why wouldn't Jesus want us to go out and tell everyone? Isn't Jesus interested in getting the word out about how special he is?

These are good questions. There's no one clear answer. But it has something to do with misunderstanding Jesus, who he is and what he is about. He never seems to want people flocking to him because he's a miracle man. He is constantly pointing people away from himself and toward God and God's kingdom. When someone came to him one day and addressed him as "good teacher," he shot back: "No one is good but God alone! Don't call me good." (Mk. 10:17) Jesus seems more interested in how we live our lives than in drawing attention to himself. In another place, Jesus says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do what I tell you?" (Lk. 6:46) The point is not to go around talking about how wonderful Jesus is but to live out the truth we see and hear in him, his life, his teachings, his spirit. There are too many Christians and churches that talk a great deal about Jesus but give themselves to a culture of violence, greed, and neglect of the poor and powerless. As Parker Palmer puts it, we are to let our lives speak the truth of Jesus.

Here this story connects us with the season of Lent. Lent is a time for us to practice with greater devotion silence and listening. It is a season for reflecting on how our lives can be shaped by what we hear as we contemplate Jesus' life and teachings and spirit. Our practices of silence, prayer, meditation, study, and self-examination come to the forefront during the six weeks of Lent. Lent offers us the opportunity of renewal through greater attention to our spiritual practice. We do this so that we can live more clearly the lives that God calls us to live in Christ.

During Lent, these two words can be our guides: God's words—This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him! And Jesus' words—Don't say anything about what you have seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead! They call us to a deeper practice of silence and listening, and the contemplation of the path of discipleship that leads to the cross and to the mystery of the resurrection, of new life.

One last word. Paul writes to the Christian community in Corinth two things in our reading for today. First, God who called forth light at creation gives us an inner light so that we can see God shining in the face, the life of Jesus. We have within us the light, the capacity to see who Jesus really is. Looking to him, we also see who we really are as God's beloved daughters and sons. His life, his words, his spirit awaken in us our true identities, touch our true nature as those created and loved eternally by God. From time to time, we get a glimpse of this radiant truth about Jesus and ourselves. It is hard to hold onto. Life is full of many things that keep us distracted from and out of touch with our true nature. But when we practice the inward journey, when we quiet ourselves, opening our hearts and minds, we see the light of God shining in Christ and in ourselves. It is the essential

truth of our being, that we are indeed created and blessed by God, pronounced good, and filled with God's spirit. And we are each called to live out our vocations, the things God gives us to do for the sake of the world.

Second, Paul says that this treasure—the gospel of God's living word to us embodied in Jesus—is placed in us like treasure in an earthen jar. Our lives are earthen jars, fragile and prone to break, and yet just the way God made us as human beings. I don't think Paul is disparaging human life. An earthen jar is a beautiful thing! A piece of pottery is a beautiful thing! Its shape, its usefulness, and the loving imprint of the maker's fingers all over it. Showing cracks and chips from wear, it becomes even more beautiful. A pitcher to hold water or a mug for coffee or tea. Without the pitcher or the cup, we could not drink the water or the coffee. It is the earthen jar and what it holds that together make it a wonderful, beautiful thing.

Paul offers this image of our lives, our glory and our vocation. God's love is meant to be carried in us so that it can be shared. God's love has to be embodied in Jesus and in us for it to do its work for the sake of the world. Our glory as earthen jars is that we contain this power that is beyond us, that does not belong to us, and when we live with awareness of what we hold within us, then our lives become a source of deep joy for us. And others are touched by this power, by this treasure, and begin to see themselves as they really are, earthen jars that hold treasure.

Because we have this power or treasure of God's love in us, we can put up with and endure anything. The earthen jar—our outer nature—is wearing away all the time. When we are sick or injured, as we grow older, when we suffer in mind or spirit, we know in a very real way that we don't live forever, that our bodies don't last forever, that we are indeed quite fragile. But there is something in us that is indestructible, that stays new all the time. And if we are staying in touch with this treasure of God's love in Jesus, if we are touching daily through our inward journey this power of God's mercy, compassion, grace, and love, then we will stay young in our spirits even while our bodies are wearing out!

Paul is a realist. He knows that we will run into afflictions, perplexities, resistance, and all the things we human beings experience. He knows that if we persist with devotion in the life of following Jesus, we will encounter conflict and even hostility. But he also knows that these things don't have to completely undo us or crush us or destroy our spirits. Not if we stay in touch with the treasure entrusted to us, the love and light that has been poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5).