

**Lent: Season for Silence and Contemplation**

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

*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 readings from Matthew's gospel and the Second Letter of Peter can be an invitation for us to enter this season of Lent with a renewed practice of silence and contemplation. Inward silence enables us to be aware of our lives in God, and leads to contemplation of who Jesus is and his call in our lives. Silence and contemplation are not the opposite of mission or outward action, but the inward journey that grounds our outward journey in God and God's purposes.

In the story of Jesus' transfiguration, Jesus, Peter, and the brothers James and John climb up a mountain. There on the summit, Jesus' appearance is transformed--face shining like the sun, clothes dazzling white. These are images of a life very close to God, radiating God's reality and presence. Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. They represent the law and the prophets, the core heritage of Israel. Their presence confirms Jesus' importance.

While all of this is happening, Peter starts chattering away: "Wow, Jesus, this is really something! How about let's build three booths for you, Elijah and Moses. Then we can properly celebrate what's happening here." Have you ever had this kind of experience? You are in a group of people, and something really special happens, one of those moments when the sacred dimension of life opens up with a clarity that cannot be missed. Then someone feels compelled to talk about it, to fill the awed, yet somehow awkward, silence with words.

Peter's impulse to "capture the moment" by building the booths is familiar behavior. We want to preserve special experiences, make them last. Nothing about life is permanent, however. Attempts to nail down and hang onto experiences or events are doomed to failure. We end up dwelling in the past while life continues and beckons us on. The life of faith is not about enshrining spiritual experiences, but being awake and aware of God's presence and movements in the here and now, and toward the future.

Just then a cloud envelopes them all. It is the cloud of God's utter mystery. Out of the cloud comes a voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Here is divine confirmation of Jesus as the one whose life is full of God. His life is pleasing to God because it is completely open to God and God's leading and call. Listen to him! That has been the problem in the gospel story up until this mountaintop moment. The disciples have not really been listening to Jesus. They are full of their own ideas of who he is or who they think he should be, and they aren't really paying attention. God doesn't call us to be full of ideas or talk, but to listen. Listening is the foundation of the life of faith. The word "obedience" has its root in "to listen." Silence is the fundamental spiritual practice that enables us to listen and then do what we hear.

The experience is suddenly over, and they start back down the mountain. Jesus tells the disciples to say nothing about what they have seen. That's odd. When we have some kind of religious experience, we want to talk excitedly about, tell everyone. Christianity has become a very talkative religion, filled with words. We confuse being a religion of the living Word of God with being a wordy religion. Here at the beginning of Lent, we have Jesus' call to silence about the deepest mystery of his being and identity. He is the one with whom God is greatly pleased. He is a human being like us who is filled with God's truth and love and purposes. He is the one

in whom God's living Word is embodied, incarnated. The experience on the mountain was as much the transfiguration of the disciples as it was Jesus'. It was also their enlightenment, their glimpsing the importance and truth of Jesus' being. Yet Jesus says to keep quiet about it until the "son of man is raised from the dead." We get a glimpse into who Jesus is and his importance, but we can easily get it wrong without seeing the whole story unfold. The rest of his teachings and ministry. His suffering. His death. And the complete surprise of his resurrection, that his life is not snuffed out by death and by those bent on controlling life.

The Tao te Ching, written centuries before our New Testament, says that those who talk don't know and those who know don't talk. It's the same thing going on here. Knowing is more important than talking. Our talking too often reveals that we really don't know what we are talking about. Jesus did not say much about the importance of talking, especially about himself. He once said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I ask you? (Lk. 6:46)" Jesus was supremely interested in our LIVING as God's people, as those who glimpse the dawning of God's reign in life, the kingdom of God, and live their lives out of that reality.

Practicing silence is central to the spiritual life. An important part of our spiritual practice each day is to cultivate our capacity to sit quietly in prayer. To be still until we begin to simply listen—to our own hearts, to God, to Jesus. This leads us to contemplation, attentive listening in order to deepen our understanding of our lives in relation to God in Christ.

This is where I was so struck by the reading from 2 Peter. It seems to be speaking of contemplation, the kind of deeper, clearer insight that is possible when we are able to practice silence and listening. The writer—either Peter himself or someone writing in Peter's name, a commonly accepted practice in those days—refers to the transfiguration event. We were there. We heard the voice. This confirmed the absolute importance of looking to Jesus, listening to Jesus, letting Jesus become the central focus of our lives. That is the prophetic message the writer is talking about. "Prophetic" means a message, a truth from God. Prophets are those who speak God's message for a particular time and place. Peter is saying that the most important message for us is the message embodied in Jesus, who he is and what he has to teach us as one in whom God is fully present.

Then comes this marvelous sentence: "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." This is a wonderful image of contemplative living. It is what we actually do when we sit in a place we have chosen as our meditative space. We may light a candle, a reminder of God and God's presence. Then we sit long enough to let our minds and hearts settle down, become quieter. Then we can listen. Then we can be attentive to what is going on around us as well as inside us. Then we can become receptive to God's voice and call in our lives. The writer isn't saying, "Look what a great experience WE had back then! You must have that same experience of that same event!" Rather, he is saying, "Pay attention to this message about Jesus, and to the living Christ himself, just as you would look at a lamp shining in a darkened room. Keep contemplating this light, this message, this life until the day dawns and the morning star that heralds the new day rises in your own hearts." The writer does not say that the day MIGHT dawn and the morning star MIGHT rise in your hearts. He says UNTIL the day dawns for you and the morning star rises in your heart. These are such encouraging words to us about our spiritual practice! As dark as the room may be, as faint as the lamp may shine, the light will dawn in you. If you keep at it, you will experience the reality of your life in God. This happens as we look to Jesus, as we contemplate with quiet minds and hearts the fullness of his life. Jesus' transfiguration has to do with our transfiguration. The words to Jesus become words to us: "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased."

Silence and contemplation are a hard sell these days, I'm afraid. Even in the church itself. I was talking with a minister recently who shared her struggles in her congregation, many of whom simply could not understand why she emphasized the important of the spiritual life. They were resistant to her taking time for her spiritual growth and not at all interested in their own. They see themselves doing good things, she said. Visiting a nursing home. Working in the food bank. And so forth. But what they don't see is their own need to come alive to their relationship with God through Jesus, to deepen and grow in their discipleship.

God in Jesus calls us not just to do good things but to be persons who live close to God. It is a call to our relationship with God revealed to us in Jesus. It is out of that call, which is the work of our inward journey, that

what we do in and for the world will flow because it comes out of who we really are and what God is giving each of us to do. There is much change that is needed in our world, filling us with a sense of urgency and sometimes despair. And yet it takes more than our well-intended actions to make a difference. It takes changed people, transfigured people whose hearts and minds are on God and their relationship with God. And for that to happen, the practice of silence, listening, and contemplation is essential.

Let us together make this season of Lent a time of renewed spiritual practice, a season of silence and contemplation. Paying closer attention to Jesus, as to a lamp shining in a dark place. Trusting that as we do so, the day will dawn in us and the morning star will rise in our hearts.