

February 19, 2012 / Transfiguration of Jesus / David L. Edwards

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!"

This is the last Sunday in the Season after Epiphany, which bridges Christmas and Lent/Easter. Epiphany means something like "showing forth" or "manifesting". The season is full of images of light, especially God's light dwelling with us in Jesus. There are light images in the reading from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. God, who called forth light in the creation, shines in our hearts so that we see the light of God's glory in Jesus. In the story from Mark's gospel, Jesus shines with divine light on the mountaintop, and 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 giving greater attention to our own lives and our life as a community as we follow Jesus on the path of discipleship today. It is the path of self-giving that leads to the new life through God's power of resurrection.

These 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, of living as those in whom the light of God in Jesus shines.

The transfiguration story takes place about mid-way through Jesus' ministry. From here on, Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, and rejection by 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. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous phrase, "the cost of discipleship", serves well as the theme of the Lenten season.

For now, however, Jesus takes Peter, James and John on a little hike. On top of the mountain, Jesus is "transfigured," his appearance changes. You might say that his disciples see his "aura". Elijah and Moses appear and have a conversation with Jesus. It is very impressive 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 of nearness to the sacred mystery of life, a mountaintop experience, literally and spiritually.

Well, while all of this is happening, Peter starts talking. Did you ever notice how some folks just cannot keep quiet in the presence of the sacred? Some things, some experiences simply do not need to be talked about but received in reverent silence. Maybe we all struggle with that a little bit. When something is going on we don't understand, we fall into nervous chatter. Rabbi, says Peter, it's so nice to be here on this mountain, with you shining with all that light. I mean, this is really cool. Hey, I've got an idea. Let's build booths for Moses, Elijah, and you. Let's capture this moment. Let's stay here forever. The text makes it clear that Peter is just filling the air with words, 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, actually. When we read especially the Gospel of Mark, we find that the disciples do not really listen to Jesus. They simply aren't getting it. Just prior to this scene, Peter made what we call the "good confession"—You are the messiah, the Christ! In the very next moment, however, he upbraids Jesus for talking about the way of suffering and rejection and death—all that weakness, defeatist stuff! Jesus calls him Satan, and tells him to get out of his way. Just after this mountaintop moment of spiritual awareness, when you think there could be no more missing of the point, the disciples start fighting about which of them is the most

important, the greatest! 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 out of the cloud –This is my beloved Son; 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, always begins with listening. And it means listening each day, each moment. 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. Parker Palmer, in his book *LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK*, says 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 in relation to God. If we are doing that, through what we call the inward journey, then we will live in the ways that the world most 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 we also glimpse our own true nature as we look at the light of God shining in Jesus. That is the way that Paul puts it in that difficult but eloquent sentence in our reading today: “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.”

The ending of this story seems to remind us that 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. The American Buddhist Jack Kornfield has a wonderful book with the wonderful title, *AFTER THE ECSTASY, THE LAUNDRY!* The point of spiritual insight or revelation is not to talk about it, but to live it. It is about living fully in the present and in daily life, with awareness of the sacred. That is where we are to live out the truth we know in Jesus and the truth of our own lives.

The mountaintop moment vanishes quickly, as they all do. 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?

It has something to do with misunderstanding, and misrepresenting, 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 called him "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 our culture of violence, greed, neglect of those in need, and destruction of God's creation.

This is where 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 the ways our lives can be shaped and filled 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 fully the light and love of God we see in Jesus.

As we begin this season of Lent, these two words can be our guides: This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him! And, don't say anything about what you have seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead! We are called to a deeper practice of silence and listening, and the contemplation and following

of the path of discipleship that leads to the cross and to the mystery of the resurrection, of new life.