

February 15, 2015 / 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 week, we begin the season of Lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday. Lent is a season for giving more careful attention to our lives as we follow Jesus on the path of discipleship. The journey leads to new life through God's power of resurrection. This is also the last Sunday of the season after Epiphany, when we hear the story of Jesus' transfiguration. We hear about God's presence, light, and love illuminating Jesus, but also us as we look to Jesus, as we live the journey of discipleship. We are on the journey of our true, created selves.

The transfiguration story takes place about mid-way through Jesus' ministry. From here, 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.

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 an 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, literally, one whom God has sent. It is a high moment of nearness to the sacred mystery of life, a mountaintop experience, literally and spiritually. I think all of us have had some experience like this, where the veil of the ordinary, the everyday, the superficial, is drawn back, and life takes on a certain glow of meaning or joy or beauty. This is such a moment, and it has to do with Jesus, who he really is. But also, who we really are.

While all of this is happening, Peter starts talking. It is hard for some folks to simply be

quiet in the presence of the sacred. Some things, some experiences need to be received in reverent silence. Maybe we all struggle with that a little bit. When something is going on we don't understand, that is, we might say, "beyond us", we fall into nervous chatter. Rabbi, says Peter, it's so nice to be here on this mountain, and 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. Peter is just filling the air with nervous chatter, for the text 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! The text has come to us with an exclamation point there. When scripture has an exclamation point, it means it. Listen to him! The problem is that the disciples have NOT been listening to Jesus. When we read the Gospel of Mark, we find that the disciples 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 chastises Jesus for talking about suffering and rejection and dying. That is 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 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! Our words listen and obey are related to each other, having common roots in French, Latin, and German. I spent a little time with another related word this past week. I went hiking at the Peaks of Otter on the Harkening Hill Trail. As I was making the initial climb, stopping for rests, the words "harkening" and "harken" were on my mind. It means to turn our attention to something, not just to hear something but to receive it with understanding. This is listening deeply. It was what I experienced as I ascended the mountain, going deeper into the forest—becoming inwardly quiet so that I could really listen. Listen to the world, the forest, around me. Listen to my own spirit, and my body which needs greater care and attention now as I hike than in my younger days. I go slower, thus I become quieter, more attentive.

The way we live flows from listening. Listening each day, each moment. Listening deeply to God, to Jesus, to our own hearts, the world around us, to other people, so that then we are able to live out of what we hear, with understanding, with more wisdom, with love. 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 others tell 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 embodies 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, as one who shows us the way. 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 (or presence) of Jesus Christ.”

The ending of this story reminds us that we are not meant to live on the mountaintop. We must go down the mountain again, into the ordinary daily affairs, the challenges, the struggles, and the joys, of life. The American Buddhist Jack Kornfield has a wonderful book with the perfect title, *AFTER THE ECSTASY, THE LAUNDRY!* The point of spiritual practice, or insight or revelation, is not to talk about it, but to live it. The goal of the spiritual journey is not to go to some special, ethereal, esoteric place, but to live 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.

In August 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a powerful and memorable speech in which he talked about having gone to the mountaintop, where he glimpsed the vision and dream of life as it is meant to be, a vision of justice and peace for all people. He knew that we were to live that dream, not on the mountaintop, but on the plains of real human life and societies and institutions. Of course, there were those then as there are now who are imprisoned by a false view of what is real—the unreality of hate, prejudice, fear, anger, violence.

Three American Muslim students in North Carolina were murdered last Tuesday by a man full of anger and violence. We found out this week that they had been volunteers for the Wake County Habitat for Humanity. Kevin and Gail Campbell, who, years ago, were part of this church community, live in the Raleigh area, and Kevin is director of Wake County Habitat. He had known and worked with these young people, and other young Muslims who volunteered in Habitat builds. He shared photos of them on Facebook. I brought two with me this morning. Yusor Abu Salha and Deah Barakat, newlyweds who were victims, are in the pictures. Not pictured is Razan Abu Salha, Yusor’s younger sister, who Kevin told me, recruited Muslim high school students to volunteer. Beyond the obvious sadness, these photos gave me such joy and hope. You see the smiles and happiness of people working together for good.

They glow, yes, are transfigured or transformed, with the light of who we really are. Dr. King lives on. His dream lives on. Those young people live on. As Kevin wrote in his blog about them and their deaths and their lives, love wins, love always wins. And it is not the possession of one religion, but the reality to which all point us...if we listen, really listen. And if we listen, we will live as those who are being transfigured. We will glow more and more with the light of God.

The mountaintop moment passes, as they always 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?

Well, it has to do with misunderstanding and misrepresenting Jesus, who he is and what he is about. We have abundant examples today and throughout history of those who call themselves Christians but who act as though they did not hear a word Jesus said. In fact, they use their religion to justify their violence and fear and hate. Jesus never wanted people flocking to him because he was a miracle man. He consistently pointed 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) 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, that even make him the center of their worship—which he never encouraged. Yet they continue to 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 listen more deeply, more carefully, so that we can live more fully the light and love of God we see in Jesus, and that is also in us.