

“Listen to Him”

Transfiguration Sunday

February 23, 2020

Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-8

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, WI

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Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before Lent begins, the Sunday when we remember the mystical encounter on a mountain that Jesus and three disciples had. The mountain-top setting, the bright light, and the voice of God all echo the account of Moses receiving the Law. Jesus was understood by some as the new Moses.

The Bible tells us that Moses was on the mountain receiving the Law for forty days. The Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days. So the church has established Lent, a forty day season from Ash Wednesday through Easter, as a time for us to acknowledge the reality of sin, to receive anew God's word, and to gain new clarity as followers of Jesus, as Christians, as people of faith.

A few other interesting points before we read the gospel account of the Transfiguration :

Mountains are prominent in Matthew's gospel, with Sermon on the Mount beginning in chapter 5, and with the Great Commission, Jesus' final words to the disciples, spoken from a mountain, in chapter 28 at the conclusion of the gospel.

The word transfiguration is the same Greek root as metamorphosis, as in the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. In the Bible, metamorphosis is sometime physical, as in our reading today, and sometimes spiritual, as in Romans 12:2, which says Be transformed, be metamorphosized, by the renewing of your mind.

The reading begins with the phrase “six days later.” In the previous chapter, Jesus and Peter had been discussing the identity of Jesus, and with one of the core affirmations of the gospel according to Matthew, Peter says: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus responds by telling his followers about sacrificial love. He says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

Listen now for God's word.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

I love mountains.

I've been lucky enough to hike up mountains in New England and in Colorado.

Last year, when our mission trip was in Peru, I got to hike Huayna Picchu with the teenagers in our group, to look over the ruins of Macchu Picchu.



And after Christmas, our family went to Virginia, where we got to climb up Old Rag Mountain.

I love the challenge of the hike and I love the views from the top. I love the fresh air and the sense of clarity that seems to come on top of a mountain.

On top of a mountain, things seem clear and fresh. I feel more awake, alert, and alive.

So I understand why so many dramatic events in the Bible are on top of mountains.

In Celtic spirituality, mountain-tops are thought of as “thin places.” A “thin place” is anywhere—a mountain, an ocean, a river, a retreat center, a cemetery, a church—where the distance between humanity and God seems smaller or thinner.

We all have been to thin places, and we’ve all probably had moments in life when God seems more present and vibrant, where it seems easier to hear God speaking to us.

But those places are hard to find and those moments are rare.

On the mountain of Transfiguration, the voice of God said to the three disciples: “This is my son, listen to him.” And soon after they went down the mountain. They couldn’t stay up there forever.

I think the commandment “listen to him” was intended for when they went down the mountain, back to fishing and planting and whatever else they did 2000 years ago in Galilee in their daily routines.

The challenge for us, in our busy and noisy 21st century lives, is to listen for God in the midst of our daily routines.

We might sense God speaking to us very clearly on a mountain, or in a hospital room, or in the woods, or maybe even in church; those might be the “thin places” of our day.

Our calling, our task, our challenge is to hear and follow God’s word at work, at school, around the dinner table, walking the dog, when we’re stuck in traffic, wherever we are.

Too often we don’t hear God in our daily routines. Listening for God is hard work.

One of the main reasons listening for God today is so hard is because our communication technology is so good, too good.

Our TV's, radio, computers, tablets, phones, and watches are constantly speaking to us, with breaking news, with status updates, with coupons for products we didn't even know that we "needed."

All of the noise in our lives makes it hard for us to hear God.

A few years ago, there was a commercial for a wireless provider with the catch line: "Can you hear me now?"

While that was good marketing, I think it's a profoundly spiritual question.

Can you hear God?

When and where in your life to have time and space to really listen for God?

Do you have thin places, quiet places, holy places?

When was the last time you turned off the screens and sounds and just sat quietly, with the hope that God would speak?

As we enter Lent, many people give up things, as a sacrifice and an effort to draw closer to God.

And while giving up something is good, I want to invite you to take on something, to make regular daily time to listen for God.

Maybe we need to get outside more, and if we can't climb mountains, at least enjoy the sunshine.

Maybe we need more silence more, quiet in our lives

Maybe we need to use our technology more appropriately.

If we have time to watch bad movies, scroll through social media posts, watch every Badger game, and get stock and weather updates every five minutes, then we can make some time to listen for God.

I have three invitations/opportunities for you, for Lent

1. Make use of our Lenten devotional, and read the whole gospel according to Matthew along with the reflections, written by members of Covenant. It is available in hard copy, it's on our website, and you can get an email version every day. There was a sign-up link in our weekly email.

2. Enjoy some silence. Maybe before you get on Facebook or Netflix or whatever, take a minute or two or five just to sit in silence. You can set the timer on your phone for however long you want.

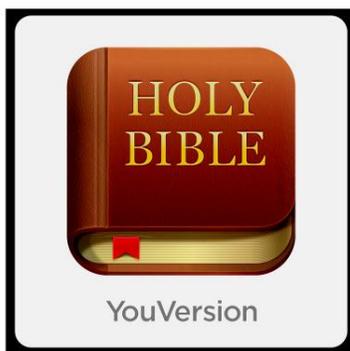


I'm going to set mine for 30 seconds.... I invite you to close your eyes and take a couple of deep breaths. Speak Lord, your servants are listening. [30 seconds]

Silent time helps us listen for God. And in case you need more inspiration, remember that if you mix up the letters in the word LISTEN, you can spell SILENT.

3. My third suggestion/invitation for you is for those with smart phones, that you be intentional and careful about how you use them. Actually if you have one, take it out, and take a look at it. Think about how you have used it in the last 24 hours. Maybe to talk with a loved one. Maybe to send important messages. Or maybe you watched an hour of puppy videos.

When you use your phone this week, I invite you to be mindful about it, and to listen for how God might be speaking to you through your friends and family, through the news, through the puppy videos that remind us of the joy of life.



www.youversion.com

And maybe you can try a new app or two.

There are many great apps out there to encourage spiritual growth.

I'm just going to suggest one: You Version.

www.youversion.com

With it you can connect with God's word in many ways:

