

Transfiguration B 2021 Mark 9:2-9

On Thursday, immediately after Morning Prayer, I drove up to Blue Knob to enjoy the fresh snow we had received overnight. It's not that I'm such a die-hard skier that I needed to be there right when they open; I just wanted a good parking spot so I didn't have to haul my gear up those treacherous steps from the lower lot. But I did get to make some fresh tracks in a few places, which made it feel a little like I was seeing those familiar slopes for the first time, even though it's been 30 years since I started skiing there. It's the same way I feel about the gospel stories that come up every year in our liturgical calendar and lectionary; there's still something new to hear even though Mark, Matthew, and Luke all tell a version of this story and we always read one of them on this last Sunday before Lent. This time, I read the story of the Transfiguration and heard the voice from heaven in a whole new way... "This is my Son, the Beloved; *listen to him!*"

God the Father speaks from heaven to identify Jesus a couple of times in the gospels. Whereas the Father speaks directly to Jesus at his baptism, "*You* are my Son...with *you* I am well-pleased" here God speaks for the benefit of the onlookers, "*This* is my Son, the Beloved: *listen to him!*" And the part that struck me differently this time is that I imagined the Father not inviting but correction, in a tone of exasperation: *Listen to him!* ...implying that Peter, James, and John, and by extension all of us, are in the bad habit of *not* listening to Jesus.

Peter, James, and John enjoy a little extra time on stage compared to the other disciples, but they don't exactly give stellar performances. Peter always seems to be living by the philosophy that you go big, even if it means you sometimes fail big. Immediately before this passage, Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah...then tries to tell Jesus that he can't be crucified, so Jesus has to rebuke him—*Get behind me, Satan!* Peter sees Jesus walking toward him on the water and jumps out of the boat...then promptly begins to sink. At the last supper, Peter vows that he will never leave Jesus' side...then three times denies knowing him before the night is out. James and John ask Jesus for positions of honor at his right and left hand; he tells them that they don't know what they're asking, and that it's not up to him to grant anyway... then they arrive here on the mountain and see Elijah and Moses at Jesus' side; imagine the ego of these two fisherman they had the audacity to ask Jesus for the places that are occupied by Moses and Elijah. Near the end of the gospel, Jesus again invites James and John along with Peter to pray in the garden of Gethsemane; he asks them to stay awake...then finds them fast asleep. Even with a voice from heaven telling them to *listen* to Jesus, these disciples, the inner circle of the inner circle, rarely seem to listen to what Jesus says.

Mark tells us that at Jesus' glorious transfiguration, the disciples are terrified and Peter doesn't know what to say...yet Peter speaks anyway and wants to *do* something. The Father's instruction to Peter, *This is my Son; listen to him!* may well be a response to Peter's impulse say something and do something in the midst of what he doesn't understand. Have you ever had someone ask you who you would want to invite to dinner if you could ask anyone, dead or alive, to be your guest? Certainly there could be no better answer to that question for a first century Jewish disciple of Jesus than Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. We don't know what their conversation was about, but given this fantastic and unique opportunity to hear it, Peter wants to run off and gather building materials. *Listen!* the voice tells him. This instruction applies to us as well: our mountaintop spiritual experiences may not involve witnessing an actual conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, but when we are gifted with moments of revelation, instead of trying to record them in photos or write them up in a dissertation or figure out how to make them last indefinitely, maybe we, too, would benefit from not speaking, not doing, but just *listening* to what God is saying to us.

The command to *listen* may also be intended for where the disciples go from here. In spite of Peter's hopes, he and Jesus will not be staying on the mountain. Jesus is headed down this mountain, through a literal and figurative valley, and back up a mountain—the mountain of Calvary. After Moses and Elijah disappear, Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone what they have witnessed until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. If Peter, James, John, and we listen very carefully to that command, we hear two important truths: that Jesus is on his way to die, and that Jesus will rise again. The disciples seem perpetually surprised that Jesus is willing to submit to human evil, even to the point of death on the cross—even though Jesus tells them time and again that this is what will happen. We, too, can find ourselves constantly surprised at the sinful, death-dealing actions of people and the systems that people have created in this world. But if we're listening, we shouldn't be surprised, because scripture tells us over and over again that that is always the way humanity, left to its own devices, will behave. Yet, after death, there is resurrection. And if we have paid attention to the gospel story, then resurrection, redemption, life on the other side of death, should not be surprising to us either. If we're listening, we know that however bad things get, the story continues in hope.

As the first disciples witnessed Jesus in glory on the mountain of transfiguration, we, too, have been shown the clearest revelation of God—the Son, the Beloved—and we are called to listen to him. If we take time with the Holy, to listen instead of speak, to dwell instead of do, what might we hear?