

“Mountaintop Moments”
Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church
11 February 2018

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, Oh Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today’s text is known as the “Transfiguration.” Similar accounts also occur in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. To “transfigure” is to have a complete change in form or appearance.¹ In the Gospel of Mark, the Transfiguration story is located, what seems to be intentionally, near the center of the Gospel. Up until this point, Jesus’ has been focused on his teachings that surround miracles and healings. Moving forward, the Gospel will be centered on Jesus’ impending death and resurrection.

Let us join together in the reading, listening for a Word from God.

Mark 9:2-9

9:2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And Jesus was transfigured before them,

9:3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

9:4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

9:5 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

9:6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

9:7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

9:8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

I remember my first of four summer camps with my high school youth group. This summer camp, though, wasn’t a backpacking, capture-the-flag-playing, mess-hall-eating

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transfiguration>

camp experience. Attendees to this event wore t-shirts like “Jesus is my homeboy” or - my favorite that I actually did own “Worship: It’s not just for church anymore.” There were teenagers from across the Southeast gathered together to play in the Jekyll Island, GA beach and wreak havoc on the Days Inn. But most notably, each morning and each evening we met for worship in a big conference room, full of high tech sound equipment that blared worship music and entailed engaging, powerful, and challenging speakers. One of my most cherished memories from these summers is waiting outside the doors for the worship space to open. We would get there an hour early so that we could rush down the aisle and get the best seat in the house. Shoes would replace spoons in the well-known card game that we played to pass the time, and we’d count down the minutes until the doors opened. Whatever God had in store for that session – we were ready.

I get the impression that Peter, John, and James were not ready for the experience they had in our story today on the mountaintop with Jesus.

Jesus brings the three disciples up to the mountaintop. Once they reach the top, Jesus’ clothes transfigure into a dazzling white, an ancient sign of purity and righteousness that Mark’s readers would have immediately recognized. Not only that, but Elijah and Moses, two of the major characters of the Jewish stories that the disciples would have known well, suddenly appear. The text says, and I think we can understand, “they were terrified.”

Peter, who always seems to be the spokesperson for the disciple’s miscues- says, “Rabbi it is good for us to be here; let us build you and Elijah and Moses a dwelling.”

Here’s another “Peter” moment – another moment that’s easy to give Peter a hard time for. – thinking, “Really? That’s the best you can come up with, Peter? You are up on top of a mountain, with the Messiah, Elijah, and Moses and you want to build dwellings?”

Today, though, let us give Peter at least some of the credit he deserves - the tradition of building tents, or dwellings, for the Divine goes back to the wandering days of the Exodus. It was a somewhat human attempt at containing the divine, but also a way of honoring the divine. Peter is just doing what he knows to be best in the site of something so otherworldly: mark the moment and offer hospitality.

The issue then isn’t that Peter’s suggestion is unreasonable; it’s just the opposite. It is too reasonable. Peter reasons that they are there to stay on the mountaintop together, so of course a dwelling must be built. Quickly, God steps in – no, this moment is not meant to last, this moment is to point to the unique nature of who Jesus is, not only a Rabbi, not only a Prophet, but the Messiah – the Savior that God’s people have been waiting for. To show that Jesus is worth listening to. God says, “This is my SON. The beloved. He is unique. LISTEN to him.”

Such a moment of Mountaintop clarity from God is a moment that many of us dream of.

Two weeks ago Andrew preached a sermon about prophets, people called by God to speak God's truth to the world. Prophets most certainly have mountaintop moments. Isaiah reported suddenly seeing the Lord. Jeremiah says that the word of the Lord suddenly came to him. Moses stumbled upon a burning bush. Some prophets appear ready for their call, like Isaiah who said, "Here I am! Send me!" and some are anything but ready. What is certain is that once a prophet hears the voice of God, things change. All movements throughout history, all change, started with a prophet who heard the voice of God in some way or the other. Each of us can be a prophet, Andrew said, our challenge, he ended the sermon with – is to listen. "All we have to do is listen," Andrew preached.

I don't know about you, but I have been thinking about Andrew's ending for the last two weeks. Listening is *hard*. True listening can be as difficult as truth telling. Igor Stravinsky, the great Russian composer said, "To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also."²

Some of us have probably had Mountaintop moments, moments when we were petrified and if we were asked to share this testimony in Sunday School class we would lace it with several, "This sounds crazy but...."

"I just knew I was supposed to stop and talk to her." or

"I can't tell you why but the accounting job was the one." or

"It made no sense but all of us a sudden I had peace and I knew it was a gift from God."

But as I talked with my husband Nate last week about this sermon, I said to him, "I've spent way more time listening for God's voice and only hearing silence than I have actually sensing that God is speaking and giving me something to listen to."

Nate responded, "But don't forget who's up there with Peter and Moses – It's Elijah."

(I should pause and mention here that this is when it pays to be married to another pastor.)

Elijah had his own mountaintop moment, Nate reminded me. It was Elijah who God told to go up to the mountain and wait for God to show up. As the story reminds us,

"Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an

² From Dr. Clifton Black's "Commentary on Mark 9:2-9," found here: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3561

earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”³

Finally it is there in the silence that Elijah meets God.

Some people have the mountaintop moment – others have an Elijah moment, wondering, “Where is God in the silence?”

In Barbara Brown Taylor’s book “When God is Silent” she writes about the excess of words in our lives, saying, “The most unfortunate side-effect of all the noise is that many of us have become hard of hearing . . . Our brains protect us from the daily barrage of words by increasing our resistance to them.”

This is not to mention the lack of trustworthiness in many of the words we hear, whether a tweet, a news story, or an advertisement, such as that tomato which is said to be “Vine Ripe” but ends up being, as Taylor describes, a disappointing “mealy and pale pink.”

Such a crisis of words only makes listening that much harder.

Taylor also writes about ancient Jewish communities who would save and preserve any document that contained the Word of God in what was called a “genizah.” These communities had so much respect for such documents that they could not be discarded – instead they were preserved, preserved for future generations to receive these words and find inspiration from them. Perhaps these communities knew the rarity and the sacredness of the Word of God.

Possibly the great irony of our text today is that God doesn’t say anything more than to “listen.” That’s the instruction: to keep listening.

Friends, this is why we come to church week after week after week - to hear the Word of God that HAS been spoken and HAS been proclaimed and that HAS been preserved and spoken and sung and shouted and whispered for generations and generations. I pray that you will have your own Mountaintop Moment where God speaks so loudly that you cannot help but listen. Perhaps each of us have at least one of these; it’s what keeps us coming back for more, but the truth is that these moments are rare. There’s only one transfiguration moment in the Gospel of Mark, and only three of the seven disciples get to experience it. We can only expect that the disciples, while they weren’t supposed to tell of it quite yet, go down that mountain and share it with the rest of the group.

While I have moved away from much of the ministry that I was part of in my youth, I do think there was something that I was being taught in those summer camp days which encouraged me to have the faith that spiritual mountaintops were possible. Perhaps there was a bit of deception and emotional manipulation going on, but nonetheless these summer camp days taught me the worthiness in being ready and expectant in listening.

³ 1 Kings 19:11-12

Each year my friends and I waited and waited all year long for that week that we knew was set-aside for us to hear and meet the Word of God. And each year, remarkably, each of us had some kind of transfiguration moment, giving us the fuel and the inspiration to go home and share Christ's love with world.

This is why we come to worship each week: to ready ourselves to see the face of God in our neighbor and to listen to the Word of God together. The rest of the week we are scattered, individuals trying our best to shine light in the darkness. But each week we are gathered back together to listen for God's voice and discern where God is calling us to lead in the world.

I've only been attending Brown Memorial regularly for about 18 months, so I am still relatively new. But what I do know is that this community desires to be and actively pursues being a prophetic community in Baltimore. The theologian Karl Barth writes about this; you could summarize a section of his Church Dogmatics, as "A community who listens together, prophesizes together." For Barth, any action that is based in hearing the voice of the God together, particularly within the congregation, is a prophetic action.

There are many prophets among us. But let us not just be a community speaking and acting, let us be a community also ready to listen together, ready to catch a glimpse of Sabbath grace, love, and calling yet again. Let this time be a mountaintop moment, a time to hear God's voice in your sister or brother sitting across from you in the pew, from the pulpit, in the music, or in the breakout discussion. This, after all, is why we have church – to hear the voice of God! Let us choose to listen. Amen.