

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Epiphany
February 7, 2014
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In the coming week, churches around the world will undergo a transformation of sorts, as the shouts of "Alleluia!" will give way to Lent's solemn petition, "Lord have mercy."

Many churches will retire their finest brass and festive hangings in favor of simpler and more contemplative fixtures. And, the lectionary will lead us down from the mountaintop where the transfigured Christ is revealed in glory, through the valley of the shadow of death, and ultimately to Jerusalem where the cross and tomb await.

Lent weighs heavily on us. It urges us to recall the suffering and death of our Lord. So, in many ways, we arrive at this final Sunday before Lent with a mix of anticipation and anxiety, a combination of joy and dread. It is no accident, then, that every year on this Sunday, we hear again the story of Christ's transfiguration on the mountaintop because, at the heart of this story, we find these all-too-familiar feelings: anticipation diluted by anxiety and joy thinned by dread.

Luke's Gospel tells us that Jesus summons Peter, James, and John to the mountaintop. Without getting our contextual bearings, we may be tempted to believe that the chosen disciples happily agreed and gleefully followed Jesus without hesitation, or reservation. However, we must recall that just a few verses earlier in Chapter 9, Jesus tells the disciples that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and then rise from the dead.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." As Peter, James, and John journey with Jesus to the mountaintop, they are forced to come to grips with the horrifying truth that Jesus, their beloved friend and leader, must suffer and die!

When they reach the top of the mountain, the Gospel tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them, and Moses and Elijah appeared. As the disciples beheld their Lord, they realized that they were in the very presence of God! But even in this incredible moment of divine transfiguration, Peter could not forget what Jesus had told them before they came to the mountain.

"Master, it is good for us to be here," Peter petitions, "Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

At some level, most of us can't help but sympathize with Peter. Who among us would knowingly submit ourselves or our loved ones to pain and suffering? Peter's efforts to protect Jesus are undoubtedly acts of love and devotion -- but, they are also acts couched in Peter and the disciples' need for safety and security. They had seen a glimpse of God's glory in the face of Jesus, and they wanted desperately to hold on to it, to protect it.

But, the moment that Peter gets into cahoots with James and John to try and hold onto and protect Jesus, is the moment that a voice from above breaks in proclaiming: THIS IS MY SON, MY CHOSEN, LISTEN TO HIM!"

And notice what happens next: As the disciples came down from the mountaintop, they didn't rush into the closest town and tell the first person they saw about what they had just witnessed. They didn't wait until Jesus wasn't looking, to talk about it. And they didn't take to social media or Facebook with the news. Luke's Gospel tells us that they "told no one any of the things they had seen!"

Although most biblical scholars interpret the disciples silence as mark of fear over what they had seen and heard -- which is certainly a plausible explanation -- perhaps there's more than one dimension here. What if the disciples' silence allowed them to be obedient to God's command?

The disciples had heard God say, "This is my Son, my chosen, LISTEN TO HIM!" So instead of running and telling the world what they had seen on the mountain, what if they had chosen instead to obey; to be silent so they could listen?

In a world bustling with noise and chaos, where words and rhetoric are shouted with impurity, stirring up fear and angst, perhaps this is the word from the Lord WE need to hear.

Amidst all the joys and heartbreaks of the world, in the face of all the delight and despair that surrounds us; and despite all the things we know and can never know, God beckons us ever so gently: *Listen!*

Imagine for a moment, what the world might look like if we listened - not in preparation to respond, but in order to understand. What might our politics look like if we listened more and argued less? What might our schools look like if we taught our children to listen as intently and deliberately as we taught them how to speak and write? And what might our churches look like if we listened intently for the voice of God from those who differ from us?

In his book, *Bread for the Journey*, the Catholic priest and theologian Henri J.M. Nouwen writes:

"To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability what we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept....The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully and even to dare to be silent with you."

As our Lenten journey nears, and the chaos of the world presses in with voices of despair clanging in our ears, may we remember how to listen. For it is in listening that we truly hear one another.

And, it is in listening THAT WE HEAR THE VOICE OF GOD!

I now ask you to join together with me to read the *Prayer of the Last Sunday of the Epiphany* which we began the service with.

"O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*