

SERMON: Listen to the Son

February 22, 2009

PRAYER: Eternal God, in a startling vision on the mountain top you revealed the glory of your Beloved Son Jesus as he prepared to enter the dark valley that would lead to his death on the cross. Through the transforming power of your Word, open now our lives to the wonders of your grace, so that we, too, may worship you in Spirit and Truth, and thus be strengthened for the journey into the darkness ahead, as followers of a crucified and risen Lord; in whose name we pray. Amen.

OT LESSON: Exodus 24:12-18

NT LESSON: Mark 9:1-9

It is a deeply strange story we have read this morning from the Gospel of Mark . Any attempt to explain it or to reduce it to the narrow confines of our expectations is almost certainly wrong. The meaning of the story comes all wrapped up in its mystery, and in the rich biblical symbols used to communicate that mystery and meaning.

For centuries the church has turned to this strange story we call the “**Transfiguration of Jesus**” on the last Sunday of Epiphany just before we enter the season of Lent. As we prepare to journey with Jesus through the darkness that leads to an upper room and a cross and an empty tomb, we are given this glimpse of glory, lest the tragedy and terror that lie ahead overwhelm us.

The story fits particularly well, it seems to me, as we begin a six-weeks series on “**Who Is Jesus?**” in our Pellet-Wearn Endowed Teacher series. The story points in dramatic fashion to who Jesus is and how we are to respond to his word of promise and command.

The transfiguration of Jesus occupies a strategic point in the Gospel of Mark. It stands almost literally mid-way in the Gospel between the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, and his death and resurrection at the end. At his baptism the voice of God declares, “**You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased.**” And at the foot of

the cross a Roman soldier confesses what the disciples have failed to realize, **“Truly this man was the Son of God.”** Here on the mountaintop, midway between baptism and resurrection, stands this strange story of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Christ.

Just before this vision of glory, Jesus had told his disciples in no uncertain terms that he **“must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders..., and be killed, and after three days rise again.”** He said it as plainly as he could. But his words fell on deaf ears. Peter was so sure Jesus has it all wrong that he grabbed him by the arm and gave him a good theological tongue-lashing. Mark says that Peter **“began to rebuke”** Jesus. The word **“rebuke”** is a strong word. Mark has used it several times before...to refer to Jesus rebuking the demons. Peter forcefully seeks to correct Jesus' misunderstanding of what it means to be the Christ of God. How could Jesus have it so wrong? Everyone knows that the Messiah does not suffer and die! Messiah reigns in glory on Mt. Zion. He comes to crush his enemies beneath his feet. He will not suffer rejection, and death. That is what he conquers, not what he experiences. Peter is sure that Jesus has it all wrong.

But Jesus rebukes Peter and declares to him and all the disciples, across all the centuries that would follow,

“If any one would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For whoever is ashamed of me and my words...of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

Six days later that solemn promise would be fulfilled as in a stunning glimpse of glory, Peter and James and John on the mountain top with Jesus see the kingdom of God coming “with power” as he is **“transfigured before them.”** The word “transfigured” comes from the same Greek word from which we get our word *metamorphosis*—the transformation that turns a caterpillar into a butterfly. In a way we can never fully fathom, it is as if Jesus' whole being is transformed. He is the same person, and yet there is an aura, a radiance, that shines around and through him as brilliant as the sun.

Mark says **“his garments became glistening, intensely white, whiter than any one on earth could bleach them.”** As strange as that may sound to us today, to those of Mark's day, who knew the language of apocalyptic visions, that would mean one thing above all else. Jesus is arrayed in the white robe of the martyrs. The brilliance of his robe is a symbol of the glory of his sacrifice soon to come. The white robe is the symbol of the victory of his self-giving love.

And with Jesus on the mountain top are **Moses and Elijah**--the great lawgiver and the great prophet of Israel. Moses and Elijah, representing all the Law and the Prophets of the Older Testament, are talking with Jesus. Just after Jesus has spoken to his disciples about his own suffering and death, and now in ecstatic vision Moses and Elijah come to reassure him that the way of suffering love that leads to a cross is indeed the way of God revealed through all the scriptures of Israel.

But look again at Peter's response to this breathtaking scene of glory. As always his response reflect the typical response of the church down through the centuries. **“Rabbi, it is good to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”** In his own impetuous way wants to hold on to the moment of glory. He wants to

enshrine it--to build a monument to it. After all, such moments of glory don't come all that often, you know. When they do, shouldn't we seek to hold on to them for dear life?

That's what we in the church do time and time again. We are forever trying to institutionalize the faith of our fathers and mothers. We take moments of brilliant insight and turn them into creeds to be passed on from generation to generation. Nothing wrong with that--so long as we do not substitute the words of the creed for the experiences of faith behind them. Yet too often we take glimpses of glory, moments of brilliant insight, and build institutions to preserve them which sometimes become more important than the glory itself.

But Jesus is not overly critical of Peter at this point. He doesn't seem to fault him for his desire to enshrine the high moment. He cuts him some slack. Mark says that Peter was so terrified that he didn't know what to say. Who would? Whatever happened on the mountaintop doesn't fit neatly into any of our normal categories of human experience. What the gospel writers have done in telling this story the way they do is to take ancient biblical symbols of the presence of God--light **and cloud and voice**, the same symbols we saw in the story of Moses on the mountain—and use them to point to which can never fully be captured in the butterfly nets of our words and thoughts. Face to face with the awesome glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the disciples are terrified. They are dumbfounded.

Then, from out of the cloud of the deep mystery of God, a voice declares, **“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.”** Those are almost the same words we heard several weeks ago at the **baptism of Jesus**. Here once again in the spotlight of the Spirit Jesus is clearly, gloriously identified as the Beloved Son of God--just before he enters the darkness that would seek to snuff out his life like a cheap candle.

“This is my Son, the Beloved,” declares the voice of God. His suffering and death are not a sign of my anger or abandonment. They are a revelation of the utter depths of my redeeming love. **“This is my Beloved Son, listen to him.”** **“Listen** to him!” Don't just be dazzled by the glory you see. Don't turn a moment of divine revelation into a photo op. Listen to him. Listen to his words, as he speaks of the suffering and death and resurrection that await him. They will guide you in his way of self-giving love. **“Listen to my Son, the Beloved.”**

Then, just as suddenly as the vision had come, it is gone. The glory vanishes. Moses and Elijah are no where to be seen. Looking around them, all Peter and James and John see is **Jesus alone**. On their way down from the mountaintop, Jesus charges them not to stay a word to anyone about it, until after he had risen from the dead. Only when they have experienced in person his living presence on the far side of death will they be able to make sense of this foretaste of the resurrection, given by God just before he, and they, enter the deep darkness that would lead to his death on a cross.

In the mean time, which will get increasingly mean indeed, the disciples are left, not so much with a vision to be remembered, as with a word to be heard and obeyed. **“This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!”**

This one whom the religious leaders accuse of blasphemy, **this one** whom the Romans will execute as a condemned felon in the most brutal way imaginable, **this one** whom the people will mock and ridicule, **this one** who will die in anguish with a cry of god forsakenness on his lips, **this one**, God declares is **“my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.”**

LISTEN! The first and primary task of disciples in every age is to listen to the Son, the Word of God made flesh. The first responsibility of the followers of Jesus is not to speak

or act. It is not to do anything, or intend anything, or promise anything, or attempt anything. It is to **listen**. As a great Baptist preacher of a generation ago, Carlyle Marney, used to insist. “The proper posture of the Church is always on its ear.” **“This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.”**

But do we? Do we listen to the Son? Or do we get so preoccupied with the bad news of the world and the windy words that pass for wisdom in our culture, that we fail to listen deeply to the one who alone is the Word made flesh, the embodied Word we most need to hear and take to heart?

One thing is clear: **when we in the church turn from listening, we have nothing worth saying**. Outwardly we can stay more than busy. We can do much that is humanly useful, for the time being. We can appear quite successful and prestigious as an institution. But if we do not listen, we have nothing to say, and soon no one will bother to listen. The Christian faith is rooted, not in the things we see, but in what we hear. **“Faith,”** as the apostle Paul insists, **“comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.”**

“The proper posture of the church is always on its ear” listening to the living word of its living Lord. He is the one to whom we must listen... not to the seductive voices of our culture or our own voices, but to the voice of the Beloved Son in whom alone are the words of eternal life. **“This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.”** Listen, not to your own fears and confusion, not to the voices that would seek to manipulate your feelings or sell you a bill of good. Listen to him—to him alone!

Listen through prayer and the study of scripture. Listen as you gather in corporate worship and as you read the newspaper. Listen with fellow Christians and in the silence of your own soul. Listen to HIM!

But if this matter of listening to the Son seems a bit too dull and passive to you, let me assure you that it is not. At times it has been quite literally a matter of life and death. Consider two examples. Seventy five years ago during the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany, the German Evangelical Church split into two groups. One group called itself the **“German Christians,”** with emphasis on the word **German.** This group supported the Nazi regime, either actively, or passively, by doing nothing to oppose it. The other group which spoke out against the Nazis called itself **“The Confessing Church.”** It was led by ones like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Niemoeller, and Karl Barth. In May of 1934 this group drafted a powerful, ringing confession of faith known as **“The Barmen Declaration.”** It is one of the confessions in our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*, a part of the constitution of our church. In it the Confessing Church declared, **“Jesus Christ, as he is attested in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death.”** With those words members of the Confessing Church committed themselves to listening to Jesus Christ alone, not to the dictates of any government, any ideology, any political party, any Führer. For that stand some like Martin Niemoeller were imprisoned in concentration camps. Others like Dietrich Bonhoeffer paid with their very lives the full “cost of discipleship,” just as countless others across the centuries had done. That’s one example of what it means to listen to the Son. Nothing dull or passive about that at all.

The other example is more recent. It comes from this past Thursday. The Rev. Maqsood Kamil, Executive Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan, spoke to a group here at the church about what it’s like being in a minority of 5% Christians in a

Muslim country. He told of what his children face being the only two Christians in a school of 4,000 students. Maqsood spoke of the ongoing threat of persecution and the death penalty for in any way “blaspheming the name of the holy prophet Mohammed.” Much of what he said was disturbing and frightening, but he spoke out of deep, personal conviction and even joy of the dangerous witness he and others are bearing in Pakistan today. He said that some of his friends in the United States have tried to get him to move here and teach theology in the safety of one of our seminaries. But that he would not consider. A smile came over his face, that was little short of a transfiguration, as he said that “even in the face of persecution and death, we trust the goodness of God. He will provide all that we need to bear a faithful witness to his name.” Yes, listening to the Beloved Son is anything but tame and passive.

And so on Jesus’ journey to the cross, he, and we, are assured that his way of self-giving love--his way of loving one’s enemies, of blessing those who curse you, of praying for those who abuse you--is indeed God’s own way. It is the way that leads to life in all its fullness. Not to safety. Not to comfort and ease. But to Life, in the name of the Beloved Son to whom alone we are to listen in life and death. To Him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.

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