

“Listen and See”
Mark 9:2-9
Sunday, February 19, 2012
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

This story is adapted from All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, by

Robert Fulgum:

“A 33-year-old truck driver by the name of Larry Walters was sitting in his lawn chair in his backyard one day wishing he could fly. For as long as he could remember he had wanted to fly but he had never had the time nor money nor opportunity to be a pilot. Hang gliding was out because there was no good place for gliding near his home. So he spent a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his backyard in his ordinary old aluminum chair -- the kind with the webbing and the rivets, the kind most of us have. One day Larry hooked 45 helium-filled surplus weather balloons to his chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB-gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down. He lifted off in his lawn chair expecting to climb a couple of hundred feet over his neighborhood. But instead he shot up 11,000 feet right through the approach corridor to the Los Angeles International Airport. When asked by the press why he did it, Larry answered: ‘Well, you can't just sit there.’ When asked if he was scared, he answered, ‘Yes...wonderfully so.’”

Peter, James, and John might answer the same. Were you scared? “Yes...wonderfully so.” They may not yet have had eyes to see, or ears to hear, or minds to understand (Deuteronomy 29:4), but they had enough sense to be confused and exhilarated and awestruck.

I. Listen and See

There are many amazing sights and sounds for Peter and his companions to take in during the transfiguration. For these three disciples of Jesus, the transfiguration is a mountaintop experience. They literally hike up a mountain with Jesus, where they are treated to a profound revelation from God. They see Jesus' garments glistening white; they see Elijah and Moses talking with him; they are enveloped in the cloud of God's Spirit; and they heard God saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

Did you know that Transfiguration is a central part of Orthodox theology? I didn't, until I did some research for this morning's sermon. In Russia, Transfiguration Day, which is celebrated in August, is accompanied by the blessing of new crops, especially apples, which are usually the first fruit to ripen at this time.

Transfiguration is one of 12 great religious holidays traditionally celebrated by all Orthodox Christians around the world. The holiday commemorates the New Testament event that occurred shortly before Jesus embarked on his last days. He appeared to his disciples in divine glory, so bright that the human eye could hardly stand it.

The Church celebrates the event as proof of the fact that Jesus Christ is the light and glory coming from his Father. It is also regarded as a sign of the voluntary nature of Jesus' suffering and death for the sake of the salvation of the world.

According to the fathers of the Church, every mortal being must strive to attain spiritual transfiguration in order to be granted eternal life and eternal bliss. And there is only one way to attain it -- through unshakable faith and observance of the Testaments and their teachings.

The mention of Moses on the mountain of the transfiguration conjures up memories of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. On that other mountain, as told in Exodus 24, a cloud

also covered the place. And Moses' face was transformed by the shining glory of the presence of God, so that when he descended from the mountain he had to wear a cloth over his face.

Otherwise, the people could not look at him, his face was so ablaze with heavenly light.

Elijah, too, has mountaintop stories, once of which is told in 1 Kings, chapter 19. On that mountain, "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 earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence."

The story of Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop brings to mind the stories of Moses on Mt. Sinai and Elijah on Mt. Horeb. These events are filled with sights and sounds that elicit a mixture of responses – fear, terror, wonder, worship and confusion.

II. Understand

Peter, as usual, misses the point entirely. All through the gospels the disciples are continually in the dark. And here in this story, Peter is again the bungling representative of the disciples.

We might consider him to be our bungling representative, as well. Peter lives out all our joys and sorrows, our glorious triumphs and our despairing defeats. In this story, Peter ineptly responds to one of God's greatest revelations – the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, the One to be listened to.

And what does Peter do? He starts running off at the mouth. "Oh, Jesus, there's Moses. We'll start building a cabin for him. And, oh, Jesus, there's Elijah. He'll need luxury accommodations, too. And, of course, now that we see how important you are, Jesus, we'll be building you a fancy little place to lay your head, too. James and John and I will get right on it.

We're always ready to dash right out and serve, Lord. You know how loyal and hard-working we are..."

At this point, a word about Peter from Eugene Petersen is helpful. Peterson is quoted in Tim Kimmel's book, Little House on the Freeway:

"Among the apostles, the one absolutely stunning success was Judas, and the one thoroughly groveling failure was Peter. Judas was a success in the ways that most impress us: he was successful both financially and politically. He cleverly arranged to control the money of the apostolic band; he skillfully manipulated the political forces of the day to accomplish his goal. And Peter was a failure in ways that we most dread: he was impotent in a crisis and socially inept. At the arrest of Jesus he collapsed, a hapless, blustering coward; in the most critical situations of his life with Jesus, the confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi and the vision on the Mount of transfiguration, he said the most embarrassingly inappropriate things. He was not the companion we would want with us in time of danger, and he was not the kind of person we would feel comfortable with at a social occasion.

"Time, of course, has reversed our judgments on the two men. Judas is now a byword for betrayal, and Peter is one of the most honored names in the church and in the world. Judas is a villain; Peter is a saint. Yet the world continues to chase after the successes of Judas, financial wealth and political power, and to defend itself against the failures of Peter, impotence and ineptness."

I appreciate Peterson's reframing of Peter for us. When we forgive and understand Peter, we begin to forgive and understand ourselves a bit.

I imagine Peter on top of that mountain, jabbering on and on, until the cloud comes and cuts off his vision. Then I imagine him being suddenly too scared to speak. I imagine this to be a rare moment for “chatty Kathy” Peter – a silent moment.

And God says from the cloud: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him!”

So often we are unable to listen. We can’t hear Jesus, the Christ, the beloved Son of God, because we are too busy talking or we are too busy building booths. We talk and talk and talk because we are afraid if we stop to listen, God might tell us something we don’t want to hear.

Or maybe we’re afraid we won’t be able to hear God at all.

We build booths – or set up tents – because we think this is the place God might be, and we want to stay there, safe and secure in His presence. We never want to leave.

We forget that God is Spirit. He moves where he will. If we remain stuck in one place, we fall out of the flow of his continually emerging kingdom on earth.

Peter, James and John certainly want to set up camp on that mountain. They want to live in the future of Jesus’ resurrection glory forever. They don’t plan on ever coming down off that mountain!

They want to avoid the reality of the cross, which must come first.

Like Peter, we often get stuck, listening to the sound of our own voices. We begin to think all of faith is on the mountain of the transfiguration. We begin to think that Jesus is all heavenly glory. We refuse to look at the cross, where Jesus was nailed, weak and suffering and in pain. Defeated.

The transfiguration is only one mountaintop experience. Golgotha is another. In Jesus’ transfiguration we glimpse his resurrection glory. In his crucifixion we glimpse his radical understanding of power.

Our youth are getting a taste of the mountaintop this weekend. An overnigher at the church with Christian friends and adult leaders is a mountaintop experience that these young folks will remember forever. It may be hard for them to return to the valley of life-as-usual come Tuesday.

The youth are also participating in some cross-carrying this weekend. They have chosen to go without food, to fast for 30 hours, in order to learn what hungry people endure every day the world over. And they have chosen to raise money for programs that seek to end hunger in the world. Our EPIC youth group is learning a lot about mountaintops and cross-carrying this weekend. That's what the Transfiguration is all about.

The transfiguration is a hard lesson for Sunday morning. On the surface it is beautiful and easy to accept. The heavenly Jesus of power and might is the Jesus we all love to hear about. Like Peter, we want to stay on the mountain worshipping this Jesus of power. But just as God does not allow Peter to remain there, so God does not allow us to remain there. Not that the mountaintop is a bad place – it is good, very good, to go to the mountaintop. But we must also come back down.

John Thomas Randolph explains this concept quite delightfully in his book, The Best Gift:

“A little boy was out in his backyard, throwing a ball up in the air. An elderly passerby, not accustomed to such youthful delights, asked the boy what he was doing. He replied, ‘I am playing a game of catch with God. I throw the ball up in the air and he throws it back.’

“I am in no position to comment on God's ability to play ball, but I do know that whatever goes up must come down. There may be exceptions, such as Charlie Brown's kite! But as a rule, whatever goes up must come down. The process is so predictable that you could

refer to it as a scientific law. The same process applies to our religious lives. It is a good thing to 'go up' to a great experience with God, but we will become greatly disillusioned if we do not remember that eventually we have to 'come down' again."

God calls us every day to listen to Jesus. And Jesus says things like, "Whoever loses their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it," and , "Take up your cross and follow me." In the verses following today's reading, Jesus says, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of others, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise," and, "If anyone would be first, they must be last of all and servant of all."

What is Jesus teaching us about the cross? What does God want us to hear? To see?

One understanding we can glean is that the cross is a source of power for Christians; the cross is not, for us, a symbol of defeat. Whenever we claim the power of God in a powerless situation, we must be prepared for crucifixion. In this way we become a servant of all.

This is a much different view of the cross than the idea that we are to be passive and submissive and lie down so the powerful can tromp all over us. Jesus was not one to be walked on. He was crucified as a result of standing over against the powers of this world. He was crucified because he empowered the oppressed people of his day and because he refused to accept the power his oppressors thought they had over him. His crucifixion, which was three days of despair for his followers, became their proclamation of victory for centuries to come. And still today the downtrodden of the world claim the cross of Jesus as their source of victory and power.

We each have crosses that we avoid and crosses that we are forced to take up. We each have mountaintop moments when we see and hear God's revelation to us.

Writes David E. Leininger:

“All this ‘mountain’ talk puts me in mind of Martin Luther King's last sermon. He delivered it April 3, 1968, on the eve of his assassination, at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, the headquarters of the Church of God in Christ, the largest African American Pentecostal denomination in the United States. He concluded his remarks that night:

“I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Closing.

Mountaintops to sustain us on the path of following Jesus; crosses for us to take up, in service to his kingdom: This is the message of the transfiguration.

After we have been dazzled and amazed by the lightshow and the awesome audio, we must come down the mountain. Frederick Buechner, in his book, Whistling in the Dark, offers a word of comfort to us who live most of our days down here in the valley. We try desperately to remember and rediscover the mountaintop. Buechner reassure us:

“[In the Transfiguration] it was the holiness of [Jesus] shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it that they were almost blinded. Even with us something like that happens once in a while. The face of a man walking his child in the park, of a woman picking peas in the

garden, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a beer at a Saturday baseball game in July. Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing.”

The Transfiguration was a particular moment, a moment of glorious revelation. In that revelation, God declared Jesus to be his beloved Son, the One to be listened to. For Peter, James and John – and for you and me – it can be hard to come back down the mountain. We can be comforted, knowing that God reveals himself in many ways, both grand and small, every day. We should be challenged, knowing that God calls us to follow Jesus in the way of the Cross.

Amen.