

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
February 10, 2013
Luke 9:28-43
Transfiguration Sunday

“Listen to Him!”

Before we get into the nitty gritty of the story we just heard from Luke, what is known as the Transfiguration, perhaps it’s a good idea to admit up front that this is a rather odd story. Jesus, James, John and Peter go up a mountain, and when they get there Jesus’ face and clothes turn a dazzling white (for no apparent reason), and then out of no where Moses and Elijah appear with him.

Things like this do not happen in real life, and if they do we usually question the person telling the story or dismiss it outright as some sort of hallucination.

Some of you may know that Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright wrote a book titled “The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions”, and in it Borg made reference to the relationship between history remembered and history metaphorized. Borg’s point was that there are actual things that happened that were remembered and turned into stories . . . like Moses going off on the mountain to see God and returning with a shining face and Jesus being “Transfigured” on the mountain.

For Borg, obsessing about what exactly happened or denying it could have happened or arguing “Oh yes it could happen, God can do anything,” is a waste of time and energy.

Our efforts are better spent looking at how the folks who remembered the story made use of it to teach religious and spiritual truth; i.e. the metaphor they made out of remembered history.

So following along those lines I’d like for you, if you can, to set aside any question you may have about *how* something like this could actually have happened, and instead ask, “*What does it have to do with me?*” Because that’s the more pressing question, I think. I’m not so much interested in the *how* as I am in the *What?* What does this story have to do with us, and what sort of meaning can we find in it for our lives today?

All week, as I was thinking about this story, and trying to find meaning in it, I couldn’t help but think about that phrase, that simple phrase: “Listen to him.” You know, God only speaks a few times in the Gospel of Luke, so it’s probably a good idea to listen when God does. “Listen to him,” God says today. “Listen to him.”

In a recent TED Talk, (and if you don’t know what TED Talks are, Google it. They are worth listening to), Julian Treasure spoke about how to be a better listener.

Julian says we spend 60% of our communication time listening, but we only retain 25% of what we hear. This is because, according to Julian, we are losing our listening. He

says that listening is a mental process, a process that we're not teaching and one that is slipping away.

I mean, think about it—we've gone from being an oral culture, where stories were passed down from generation to generation orally face to face; to one where the written word took prominence (printing press), and then to an audio culture (where sounds can be recorded), to a video culture, to a digital culture—where people communicate through e-mail or text messaging.

And, we live in a noisy culture. Julian says that, "The world is now so noisy with this cacophony going on visually and auditorily, it's just hard to listen; it's tiring to listen."

Some people put on headphones to cancel out the noise, which ironically brings in more noise.

Advertisers lure us with soundbites . . . because we can only listen to a bite at a time. We don't have any attention span for listening.

Television commercials ask, "Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?"

Headlines scream at us to grab our attention.

And news broadcasters or talk show hosts often do more talking than they do listening.

Peter, in today's story from Luke, is also doing more talking than listening. He's up on the mountain with Jesus, and it's a glorious moment, so wonderful that Peter wants to encapsulate it. "Master," he says, "it is good for us to be here; let us make 3 dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah . . ." And I'd never noticed what Luke wrote next about Peter, but it's so telling, "not knowing what he said," Luke wrote. In other words, Peter was so busy running his mouth, he wasn't even listening to what he was saying.

Now, we've all had conversations with people like that. They keep talking and talking and talking and you think, "Man, are they even listening to what they're saying?" Truth be told, all of us have been that person at one time or another.

There's a reason Peter keeps talking. You see, up until this time in Luke's story, all has been well. Jesus and the disciples have healed people, exorcised demons, given sight to the blind and the ability to walk to the paralyzed; they've seen Jesus calm storms; crowds wait for him and flock to him.

But then one day, after three years of travelling, things take a different direction. Jesus wants to go to Jerusalem, which is both a literal and a symbolic move. They've been in Galilee, which has been friendly to them. But Jerusalem is a hotbed of activity, and it might not be as friendly to their mission.

Jesus chooses this occasion to ask them a question. “Who do people say that I am?” And when Peter answers, “You are the Messiah,” he uses the occasion to introduce a totally new idea, to teach them that things are going to take a dangerous turn, that in Jerusalem he’ll suffer and die.

“No way,” Peter said. “You’re not going to get arrested and suffer and die. You’re the Messiah! A Messiah doesn’t suffer and die. You’re mistaken.”

And that’s when Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan.” In other words, you’re not listening, Peter.

You’re not listening. And then tells him, if you want to follow me, take up your cross.

He had never mentioned a cross before. And they knew what a cross was. The Romans had introduced it, and it was a very public means of executing traitors and troublemakers. Take up a cross? Surely he was kidding. Someone once said that you couldn’t find a more difficult marketing strategy than that. “Take up a cross and lose your life” is hardly a way to foster church growth.

In an essay in Harper’s Magazine, “The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong,” the author argues that American Christianity has subtly exchanged biblical religion for a competing creed, a creed that doesn’t at all reflect Jesus and his call to deep sharing and self-sacrifice, but is instead focused on the self and its needs.

This is the American Jesus, who will make you healthy and wealthy and happy.

And let’s be honest, this Jesus sells! Peter was on to something. If Jesus is going to light up like a neon sign on the Las Vegas strip, we might as well build a strip mall and start charging admission. Why go down the mountain when we can stay on top with that Jesus?

Why go down the mountain if Jesus can make me healthy and wealthy and happy?

Why go down the mountain?

Here’s why: because that’s not who Jesus is. And if we begin to think that is who Jesus is, we’ve gone down the wrong road. We’ve missed the point. We aren’t listening.

You see, if we aren’t listening for the answer to “Who do you say that I am,” we misunderstand what it means to be a disciple. And being a disciple isn’t about what’s best for me or my needs, or you and your needs; it’s about what’s best for others, and their needs.

Someone once said that good religion ought to call you out of yourself for a while and redirect your focus and your attention, from yourself, and your needs, and your feelings, to something much greater. And that a faithful disciple, and a faithful church, is

concerned about Christ's mission of standing with the oppressed, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, nurturing the children, welcoming the excluded, living its life for the sake of others, and listening to others.

After Peter makes the suggestion to stay on the mountaintop, is it any wonder God's voice booms from heaven, "Listen to him." In other words, "Do you not get it? Have you not been listening all along?"

In that TED Talk, Julian says that without conscious listening, the world is a scary place. And I think that's so true.

Would the world not be a better place if nations listened to one another?

Would the world not be a far better place and more peaceful place if religions listened to one another?

Would the church of Jesus Christ not be a far better place if we stopped shouting and started listening?

Would our country not be better off if we started listening to one another?

After God boomed from heaven, "Listen to him," Jesus, Peter, James and John climbed down the mountain into a waiting crowd, and went right to work healing a paralyzed boy.

It is a wonderful metaphor for the church. IN fact, maybe this is why the story is remembered. For as much as we may want to remain on the mountaintop, there is work to be done out on the plain. There are people who need to be healed. There are injustices that need to be brought to light.

Just yesterday I heard someone say that the church gets it backwards when we think we need to leave our sanctuaries to take Jesus into the world. We need to leave our sanctuaries and go into the world because that's where Jesus is.

Listen to him, God said. Listen to him.

Amen.

Lord,

You have put your wonderful hope in us born of the spirit of Jesus.
This hope empowers us to be your servants in this world bringing light into darkness,
Hope into despair, Warmth into coldness, Friendship into loneliness, Food into hunger
and Care into trouble.

Lord, let us remember that after you were transfigured and blessed by God, you came
down off the mountain. You didn't stay up there, you came down among your people.
And the first thing you did was heal someone. Lord, you are still in our midst. You are
still healing. You are still touching lives. And so we pray that you will do so today in our
midst.

We pray for those who are overwhelmed with the snow, cold and no electricity in the
North East. We pray for those who live in places of drought. We pray for those who live
in areas of flooding. And we pray for those who don't have clean water for drinking.

We pray for the violence in our world to end. We pray for the countries that are torn by
civil war. We pray for the children who are taken into slave trade and trafficking. And we
pray that your light would shine and transform our world. Bring your hope into the world.

Amen.