

LISTEN TO HIM

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Matthew 17:1-9

David Schwartz is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, and he tells this story:

“I was working at a grade school as a therapist a number of years ago and was talking with a second-grade student. At some point during the conversation, the student appeared confused and asked me, ‘Are you really interested in what I have to say?’ At the time, this second grader was living in a large family with his aunt, uncle, brothers and sisters in the same household. His experience talking with adults had been mostly limited to having his behaviors corrected when he was doing something they didn’t like. Outside of that, he had very few extended conversations with the adults in his life.

“I reassured him I was absolutely interested in what he had to say, and, over the next few months, this child’s willingness to communicate and share his thoughts expanded dramatically. By the end of our sessions, he had transformed himself from a shy, barely speaking child into someone who felt his voice mattered.”¹

Listening is important. Children, teens, and adults feel empowered when they feel listened to. When you feel that someone is truly listening and that what you say is respected, then your self-esteem improves. Actively listening to someone can help build an emotional connection. When we hear of a marriage that has failed, the reason is often given, "We just didn't talk anymore." When there is no talking, there is no listening either. Listening is a skill that we all need to practice.

The reading from Matthew that I chose for today is about listening. Today is Transfiguration Sunday. This is the final Sunday of the season of Epiphany and the last Sunday before Lent. That's right, Lent begins this week. Tuesday will be Mardi Gras and the day following that is Ash Wednesday. On Wednesday, we extend Mardi Gras one day with our pancake supper. We then transition immediately into Lent with our Ash Wednesday Worship and the ancient ritual of the Imposition of Ashes.

Our reading from Matthew today is the story of the Transfiguration. It begins by telling us that Jesus leads Peter, James, and John alone up a high mountain. Why Peter, James, and John? We don’t know. We assume that these were the three that Jesus felt closest to.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/adolescents-explained/202202/why-listening-is-powerful>

When they reach the top, immediately something happens. Jesus changes; he is transformed; he is transfigured. We are told that Jesus' face *shone like the sun*. *His clothes became dazzlingly white*. As students of scripture, we know that these are signs of God's presence. After Moses met God on Mt. Sinai, his face glowed. In Exodus, we read this description of Moses: *When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him*. In fact, for the rest of his life, Moses wore a veil over his face because people found his glowing countenance to be too disconcerting to look at directly.

So, Jesus has led three of his disciples up a mountain, and when they reach the top, Jesus and his clothing begin to glow. And if that is not enough, two more people appear next to Jesus. They are Moses and Elijah—two heroes of the past—and they are speaking with Jesus.

Once again, for those familiar with scripture (and Matthew's congregation certainly would have been), this is an extraordinary moment. Jesus joins the pantheon of Israel's great heroes. He is alongside Moses, who represents the Law, and Elijah, who represents the prophets. For the Jews, the phrase Law and Prophets describes their scripture. For Peter, James, and John, Jesus' glory could not shine brighter if God himself were to speak. (Which God does in a moment.)

Peter is watching all of this. He sees Moses and Elijah. (Although, I'm not sure how he would know what they looked like. My colleagues like to speculate that they were wearing nametags with "Hello, my name is.") Peter is watching all of this and he takes it in and he has an idea. And honestly, it's not a terrible idea given the circumstance. It's just that Peter doesn't see the big picture.

Peter says to Jesus, *Lord, it is good for us to be here*. By "us," he means the three disciples. He says, *If you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*. By dwellings, he means shelters or huts—some sort of small structure for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses to reside in. It was not unusual for Israelite farmers during harvest season to construct a small hut in the field for them to live in and be close to their work.

We don't know exactly what Peter had in mind with this suggestion. Possibly he wanted to memorialize this moment for the world, to create a religious museum for all to visit, a mountaintop tabernacle.

As I said, it's not a terrible idea, just not the right one. Because when Peter says this, a bright cloud appears and a voice from the cloud declares, *This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him*.

Jesus leaves Moses and Elijah and goes to his friends, touches them reassuringly, and tells them, *Get up and do not be afraid*. The disciples lift their

heads and realize that Moses and Elijah are gone and they are once again alone with Jesus.

We like to kid Peter for his many public gaffes. But his idea to create a shrine to the Transfiguration moment was not a terrible idea. What he didn't realize was that times had changed. This is indeed an inflection point for a new way of living in relationship with the Lord. The past was about Moses and the Law. Obeying God meant adhering to God's commandments. The past was about those prophets who spoke and interpreted God's word—prophets like Elijah and Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, and more. These are the voices which formed the foundation of the faith.

But things have changed. There is a new player on the board, and it is God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And God says, *Listen to him*.

Last Sunday, I offered you a passage from the book of Deuteronomy. Moses had led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and shepherded them through the wilderness and toward the land promised them by God. Our reading last week took place on the bank of the Jordan river—the boundary with this new land.

Here, Moses delivers a speech. And in this speech, he tells the people that upon entering this land, they will have a choice before them. As Moses frames it, they can choose life, or they can choose death. Choosing life would be to choose God—to walk in God's ways and observe God's commandments. Death, on the other hand, would be the choice to ignore God. The land they are entering has people who worship other gods. The Hebrews will be tempted to follow these deities. Doing so, warns Moses, would be a poor choice.

This idea of choice is reflected with Jesus on top of the mountain. Peter's plan reflects the wrong choice. There is nothing bad about Moses and Elijah, but that is not the way to God. God intervenes and points the disciples on the right path by commanding, *This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him*. To choose Jesus is to walk with God. It is life.

We have to remember that at this time Jesus is not yet “the guy.” Yes, he has performed miracles and deeds of power, but people likely see him as a talented rabbi or maybe some sort of prophet. The authorities will eventually see him as a seditious threat. The disciples are still trying to figure out who he is and how he fits into their understanding of God. While Peter has already confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, he still can't put all the pieces together.

It takes a moment of revelation—a mountain top encounter with God—to see what is before him. The choice is Moses and Elijah or Jesus. And God is clear, *Listen to him*.

But why listen to him? What does Jesus offer that was not already there? In a word, everything. Jesus is God. He is the Messiah. He is the one that we should

listen to. Jesus said, *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.* Jesus is the fulfillment of all that has come before.

Today, we are too easily distracted by the lesser gods of our own world. As Moses told his people, these gods represent death. Instead, we should follow Jesus with his radical message of love, compassion, and forgiveness. These things are the stones which pave the route to the Kingdom of God.

The choice before us is stated most succinctly in the Beatitudes. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus says:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

This is certainly not what we expect, is it? What person in their right mind would believe that it is blessed to be poor or hungry or persecuted? Wouldn't we rather choose to be rich, full, and respected? Yet, God says, *Listen to him.*

Furthermore, Jesus tells us to love our enemies, take up our cross, that to be great we must be servants, and if we want to gain our life then we must lose it. I would go on, but I would just be reading the gospels to you. The words of Jesus call us to radically rethink our lives.

I believe that the church today is at a Transfiguration moment—not just our congregation, but the whole of the Christian church. Everywhere across our country attendance has declined. People stayed home during COVID and haven't returned. Everywhere there is anxiety and fear. People have lost the calling to “do church.”

So, what is our response? Is our response the same as Peter's? Do we build a shrine to the past and hope people will climb the mountain to visit? Or do we give our whole selves and actively listen to the one who tells us to deny ourselves and follow him? Do we challenge the old ways and seek a new path to the kingdom? Do we worship the past or do we worship our Lord? We need to choose. Let us *Listen to him.*