

Exodus 24:12-18; 1 Kings 19:1-13

Luke 9:28-45

March 3, 2019

Transfiguration Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, North Carolina

LISTEN TO JESUS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

First thing Thursday morning, I went into Cheryl's office and handed her a Post-it note. She asked, "Is that your sermon title?" She looked at it and said, "Listen to Jesus . . . If we all did that, maybe we'd be better off." Then I asked her to take messages for me. Cheryl said, "You've got to write it, huh?" I said, "Yeah, at least I've got to try to write it." As I walked out of her office, I commented, "Maybe you just wrote it for me. . . If we all listened to Jesus, maybe we'd be better off." I suppose the only editorial change I would make to Cheryl's sermon would be to change "Maybe we'd be better off" to "Definitely we'd be better off."

In my reading for today's sermon, I came across these thoughts about "Listening to the Son" —

* "What does it mean to listen to the Son?"

* "For Luke, the voice of the chosen Son stands our dominant values on their heads."

* "What voices do we need to block out if we are to listen to the Son?"

* "What about the voices of those in trouble or distress, voices that challenge the status quo of comfort and familiarity?"

* "If we listen to those voices, what grace might we encounter that we cannot now imagine?"¹

Each Sunday, before the elder and I read the scripture lessons for the day, we all join in a unison Prayer for Illumination. Perhaps it's obvious why we do that. Then again, perhaps you've wondered why we say that prayer. According to the *Book of Common Worship*, "Before reading from the Bible, we seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit and call upon God to make us receptive to the life-giving Word that comes to us through both the reading and proclamation of Scripture." Here's another explanation that adds a more explicit element of response to God's Word: "Before we read from the Bible, we pray that the Holy Spirit will help us to hear what God is saying to us, and to do what God is calling us to do as followers of Jesus Christ."²

Here are some examples of Prayers of Illumination which we have used in our worship services. Notice the appeal to God to open our hearts and minds to hear the Word AND to **do** the Word:

"Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voices but your own, so that we may hear your Word and also do it; through Christ our Lord."

"Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what you have revealed, and do what you have commanded."

“Living God, help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and, believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord.”

“Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us, may the Spirit of God rest upon us. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living. Amen.”

There’s a story about the new minister on her first Sunday in the pulpit. The sanctuary was full. Everyone was excited to hear what the preacher would say. She didn’t disappoint them. She preached a wonderful sermon. The topic was timely, her delivery was excellent, and she was easy to understand. To top it off, she ended her sermon with a call for the congregation to “introduce people to Jesus Christ, help them become his faithful followers, and equip them to share God’s love with others.”

Word quickly spread during the week. There were even more people in worship the next Sunday, including members who hadn’t been in church for years. The ushers had to bring in extra chairs. The preacher stood up and preached the same sermon as the week before. The folks who hadn’t been there the previous Sunday were impressed. Even many of the people who had already heard the sermon enjoyed it a second time. While some people were a little put off and puzzled about hearing the same sermon, they gave the preacher the benefit of the doubt, “Well, she’s been busy unpacking and settling in. Besides, it was a really good sermon.”

On the third Sunday, there were even more people in worship. Many of them were wondering what the preacher would preach. Sure enough, she preached the very same sermon. The members of the Pastor Search Committee were embarrassed. Many of the congregation members were upset. People were even texting the elders during the final hymn to demand that something be done. Just before the benediction, the Clerk of Session stood up and said, “Preacher, on behalf of the congregation, I want to say that we loved your sermon two weeks ago. Last Sunday, some of us were surprised to hear the same sermon again, but repetition isn’t always a bad thing — and it was a good sermon. But three weeks in a row with the same sermon is unacceptable. Don’t you have another sermon to preach?” The pastor smiled and said, “Yes, I have another sermon to preach. When you start doing what I spoke about in the first sermon, I’ll move on to preach another one.”

I wonder if that’s how God and Jesus feel sometimes. Up there on the mountain of Transfiguration, God himself tells Peter, James, and John, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” This is not a mere suggestion from God. It’s an imperative, a command. In my Bible (the New Revised Standard Version), the imperative is highlighted with an exclamation point! Last Sunday, we heard Jesus say at the end of his Sermon on the Plain, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built.” (Luke 6:46-48)

The heavenly voice on the mountain of Transfiguration could just as well have said, “This is my Son, the Chosen; obey him!” Our English words “obedience, obey” are derived from the Latin word *oboedire*, which means “pay attention to, give ear to.” That gives new meaning to Jesus telling his disciples and others who hear him, “Let anyone with ears listen!” (cf. Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 16, 43)

Today’s gospel story about Jesus, Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John up on the mountain of Transfiguration is a strange, other-worldly story. It sounds a lot like the stories about Moses and Elijah meeting God on the mountains. We might be tempted to stay up on the mountain, surrounded by the glory and the light of Jesus’ transfiguration. That seems to be what Peter was suggesting (even if, as Luke tells us, he didn’t know what he was saying). Who wouldn’t want to stay up on the mountain and bask in the glory of God?

The lectionary gospel reading for this Transfiguration Sunday is Luke 9:28-36, which is the story of Jesus and the disciples on the mountain. On my planning calendar, the lectionary reading also includes verses 37-43 in parentheses — the story about Jesus healing a boy with a demon. I chose to extend the reading through verse 45, and I’m glad I did once I realized the importance in these stories of “listening to Jesus.”

Up on the mountain, the heavenly voice commands the disciples, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” But Jesus doesn’t let Peter, James, and John stay up on the mountain. The next day they came down the mountain, right into the midst of the chaos of a great crowd. Suddenly, the encounter becomes very personal and anguished. A desperate father with an only son begs Jesus to heal his boy. He tells Jesus, “I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” But Jesus was able to cast it out. Luke tells us, “Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.” Apparently the unclean spirit listened to Jesus and obeyed him! The contrast with the disciples is unmistakable.

As the crowd was buzzing about what they had just seen Jesus do, Jesus told his disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears . . .” In other words, “Listen up, guys! Let anyone who has ears listen.” Then Jesus told them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” And the disciples didn’t/couldn’t understand what Jesus was saying.

So, what about us? Do we come to worship to listen to Jesus? Do we take to heart what we hear from God’s Word? Are we willing to translate our hearing into doing? After all, as the letter of James tells us, “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing.” (James 1:22-25)

When I stand up to read God’s Word before I preach, I try to remember each week to invite you to “Listen **for** God’s Word.” Not “Listen **to** God’s Word” but “Listen **for** God’s Word.” There’s a difference. We can listen **to** God’s Word and it can go in

one ear and out the other. But when we actively listen **for** God's Word, there's a better chance that the Word will take root in our hearts and bear fruit.

Of course, listening **for** God's Word in Jesus Christ means being open to do what Jesus calls us to do, and that can be uncomfortable and challenging. It means coming down from the glorious mountaintop into the chaos of great crowd where the needs are real and messy and demanding. It means listening to Jesus who willingly came down from the mountain of glory and headed to Jerusalem where he was betrayed into human hands. It means listening to Jesus — obeying Jesus — following Jesus where he leads us. It means listening to Jesus and doing what he says. And, as we have heard in Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, what he says can challenge us to our very core. But the heavenly voice says, "Listen to him!"

Typically the Prayer for Illumination comes before the reading of the scripture lessons. But there's really no reason not to ask God to open our hearts and minds to what we've **already** heard. To that end, let us pray:

"Holy God, Word made flesh, let us come to this Word open to being surprised. Silence our agendas. Banish our assumptions. Cast out our casual detachment. Confound our expectations. Clear the cobwebs from our ears. Penetrate the corners of our hearts with this Word. We know that you can. We pray that you will. We wait with great anticipation. Amen."

NOTES

¹Kimbery Miller Van Driel, "Luke 9:28-36 (37-43), Homiletical Perspective," in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Advent Through Transfiguration*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 457.

²"Prayer for Illumination," at www.presbyterianmission.org.