

“Listen to Him”
Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12-18; II Peter 1:16-19
Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.

¹⁴To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.” ¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

¹⁶The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.

¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

¹Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

II Peter 1:16-19

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

¹⁹“So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

The Sermon

Erma Bombeck said, “It seem[s] rather incongruous that in a society of super sophisticated communication, we often suffer from a shortage of listeners.”ⁱ

But this is not an altogether new phenomenon.

God summoned Moses, and Moses went up the mountain, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; and on the seventh day, God called to Moses out of the cloud.

From down below, it looked to the people of Israel like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain.

And Moses was there for forty days and forty nights, while God spoke to him, and God sent Moses back down to the people with the tablets inscribed with the words of the covenant, the ten commandments (Exodus 34:28).

When Moses came back down from Mount Sinai, with the tablets of the covenant in his hand, he didn’t know that the skin of his face was shining because he had been talking with God.

And all of the Israelites were afraid to come near him. They saw that his face was shining, and they were afraid.

We tend to be easily distracted by shiny things.

Distraction is a core concept for magicians: there’s no real magic there; they just know how to get us to focus on the wrong thing, so the “real” magic can happen someplace else—right in front of you, but you don’t see it, because your attention has been distracted by something else.

When Moses came down and his face was shining, they saw the strange glow, and they ran away. He had the direct words of God written on two tablets right there in his hands, but they never saw those.

We tend to be distracted by shiny things. Sometimes we run away in fear, and sometimes we see something shining and it's like we can't see anything else. Shiny new curriculum, shiny new candidates, shiny new technology, shiny new five-year plans and programs for church growth.

A year goes by, and the curriculum isn't that exciting anymore;
the candidate turned out to be human after all;
the technology had been superseded before it even left the shelf.

Every shiny new car is already depreciating in value the instant you drive it off the lot.

Those developments are perfectly natural; there's nothing wrong with that. It means the world is still turning. That's a good thing.

It's just that we keep being distracted by the next shiny thing, and the next one after that.

The problem with that is that it leads to a deficit of attention. And a society of super sophisticated communication devices continues to suffer from a shortage of listeners.

In an easily distracted society, where we get thrown off course every time we see something shiny—which is to say, constantly—listening is tougher to do than it may seem.

But still, the invitation comes.

When God invites you to listen, what do you hope you will hear?

It's harder than it seems like it ought to be to listen to the world around us.

Macrina Wiederkehr wrote,

“When the wind sings through the pines
like a breath of God
awakening you to the sacred present
calling your soul to new insights...
Take off your shoes;
The ground you stand on is holy
The ground you are is holy.”ⁱⁱ

If it takes effort to stop long enough to listen to the world around us, it’s even harder to learn to listen to each other.

It’s much easier to settle for presumptions about people, and that ease can get us into lazy habits, and, reinforced by pundits on TV, on the internet and in the coffee shop, we become entirely comfortable talking to or about other people, starting our sentences with words like,

“That guy is so arrogant,” or
“That lady doesn’t understand the way things work,” or
“Those people just want to have everything given to them,” or
“What nobody ever thinks about is...,” or
“You need...”

It is the polar *opposite* of listening when we try to tell someone else what they think,
what they don’t know,
what their disposition is,
what they haven’t thought about,
or what their characteristics are
based on their background,
or their family, or their skin color, or their sex,
or their orientation or political affiliation or anything else.

Maybe that standoffish guy we easily labeled as arrogant is so shy, maybe his self-esteem is so low, maybe his sense of self has been made

so fragile by the unknown hell he has been through, that the idea of having to initiate a conversation fills him with a terror you or I may never even have imagined. So he *can't* reach out; he can't say anything.

And you and I go, “That guy is so arrogant...”

Maybe that lady whom we readily classified as not understanding the way things work is, in fact, bravely seeking to do something creative, productive and helpful, and has learned that the way it has always worked before is not working now, so she's summoning as much or more wisdom, knowledge and understanding as you or I have, and is reaching beyond the old limitations in a new and different way, to try to make something good happen—to try to make something work.

And every time we start a sentence with the words “You need,” and every time we make a blanket statement about anyone based on who they are, we are only making wild guesses based on our own biases and presuppositions.

It takes time, and work, to learn to listen to each other.

Which isn't that surprising, because it's hard enough to learn to listen to ourselves.

I once heard a personal security expert say that humans are the only animal that chooses to ignore its instincts.

Paul said in the Letter to the Romans (7:15-19):

“I don't understand my own actions.
I do not do what I want,
but I do the very thing I hate.
I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.
For I don't do the good I want,
but the evil I don't want is what I do.”

He says it's the sin in him that denies who he really is:

"If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it,
but sin that dwells within me" (Romans 7:20).

It's harder than it sees like it ought to be for us to learn to listen to ourselves.

Listening is hard. It takes energy and patience and faith and hope and a great deal of love.

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, the inner circle of the inner circle, and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

And suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

And Peter said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

I imagine Peter must dread Transfiguration Sunday. Every year on this weekend, in churches that follow the lectionary or observe the liturgical calendar, inevitably, invariably, Peter gets mocked and maligned by preachers like me, who smile at what we imagine to be his impetuous need to *do something* in the face of the breathtaking astonishment he is witnessing.

As if we would have been able to control our own impulses when faced with so much that is so shiny.

While Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them all, and from the cloud a voice said:

This is my Son, the Beloved.

With him I am well pleased.

Listen.

To him.

When God reminds you to listen, what do you hope you will hear?

And when God says, “Listen *to him*,” what do you hear Jesus saying to you?

The one who spoke with everyone;
the one who fed people who didn’t even ask for it;
the one who restored life in the face of every expression of death;
the one who set his face to Jerusalem and would not stop until he had given everything anyone could give:

What do you hear Jesus saying, when you listen to him?

The light of his transfiguration only becomes something other than another shiny distraction when his disciples seriously undertake to *listen to him*.

A Stanford professor recently published an item reflecting on the divorce of her 80-year-old parents in which she said,

“The spectacular collapse of my parents’ marriage has been too much for me. I am undone, untethered, dysfunctional. I am in a small boat, too fatigued to pick up an oar, lost at sea. *The lighthouse that never failed to guide me home is now out of service.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

We need all the real light we can get—not just some shiny momentary distraction, but the transfigured face of God the savior.

Early in the second century, a leader of the second or third generation of the Church remembered the events on the mountain that day, when Peter, James and John were dazzled by the light, and said, in II Peter:

“We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

“You will do well to be attentive to this
as to a lamp shining in a dark place,
until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

The poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen, who died in 2016 after decades of deep spiritual reflection in his vast troves of poetry and songs, entrusted to his musician son Adam some final recorded readings of his last poems.

Cohen was a faithful Jew as well as an ordained Buddhist monk, and though he didn’t claim to be a Christian, his relationship with Jesus was very much like that of the 20th century Jewish theologian Martin Buber, who said,

“From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Savior has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance.”^{iv}

In one of Leonard Cohen’s very last poetic etchings, as a man who by his own self-description had craved and basked in the public’s attention to and affirmation of his words, he wrote a touching admonition to the many thousands who had hung on his every word:

“Listen to the hummingbird whose wings you cannot see

Listen to the hummingbird. Don't listen to me.
 Listen to the butterfly whose days but number three
 Listen to the butterfly. Don't listen to me.
 Listen to the masterminds describe who map eternity
 Listen to the masterminds; don't listen to me.
 Listen to the Prince of Peace who gave his life for thee
 Listen to the Prince of Peace. Don't listen to me.^v

The voice from the cloud said:

This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.

Listen to him.

When God reminds you to listen, what do you hope you will hear?

And when God says, “Listen *to him*,” what do you hear Jesus saying to you?

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 February 23, 2020

ⁱ Erma Bombeck. (n.d.). AZQuotes.com. Retrieved February 23, 2020, from AZQuotes.com Web site: <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/536799>. This is one of those websites that irritatingly does not cite the original location of the quote.

ⁱⁱ Macrina Wiederkehr, Seasons of Your Heart (Revised & Expanded. New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 5-6

ⁱⁱⁱ Allyson Hobbs, “When 80-Year-Old Parents Divorce” (emphasis added) https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/opinion/parents-divorce.html?algo=top_conversion&fallback=false&imp_id=822962163&imp_id=299387048&action=click&module=trending&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer

^{iv} Oft-repeated, but I have not yet found the original source of this quote.

^v Leonard Cohen, from the documentary short The Story of Thanks for the Dance (Sony Music Entertainment, 2019; 7:40). Some unused verses for “Listen to the Hummingbird” (Refrains repeat the first half of each line and add, “don’t listen to me”)