

Today our gospel lesson skips eight chapters in Mark to put us on the mountaintop with Jesus, Peter, James, John, Moses and Elijah in a very strange and maybe familiar story to some of you. Today is the final Sunday after Epiphany. It's Transfiguration Sunday, which is the Sunday before we begin the season of Lent, the forty days that lead to the cross. The mood of this church season is beginning to change. On this Sunday we come to the end of another church season. "Having seen the lights of Epiphany, we prepare now for the long shadows of Lent" (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.org](http://journeywithjesus.org)). This particular story of Jesus' transfiguration, thick in theology, is also recorded in Matthew and Luke. This story is a small window into a much larger love story that defies explanation. Though the Transfiguration story is strange, it is "more evocative than something to be figured out" (Working Preacher podcast). Before we read God's Word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Even in the strangeness and mystery of Jesus' transfiguration, I can't help myself, and I wonder what Peter, James and John were thinking that day on the mountain top?! We are told in Mark that six days later- six days after Jesus had shared his first passion prediction- six days after Jesus had rebuked Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33)- six days after Jesus had said to the crowd, including his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). Six days later- after these loaded and intense conversations, Jesus took these three disciples up a high mountain away from life's distractions...just them and Jesus. And it is no accident that this story takes place on a mountain, as mountains are places where epiphanies take place

throughout the Bible- especially in the story of Moses. “Anthropologists often tell us that mountains are places of meeting between heaven and earth” (David Jacobsen, WP). These places are often referred to as “thin places”- you know- those places where we feel closer to God and God feels closer to us. And there on that high mountain, Jesus was transfigured by God right before their very eyes- he was lit up in dazzling white, a sign of the lifting of the veil between heaven and earth. One of my colleagues commented that this scene could be a detergent commercial. Can’t you see it? Want your clothes to be like Jesus’ clothes-dazzlin’ white?! OK- back to the text. Where has a thin place been for you? A place where you strongly experienced God’s presence with you and felt really close to God? Some people might call it a mountain top experience- an experience that was a fleeting glimpse of the kingdom of heaven here on earth or where you felt you saw Jesus briefly in his glory face-to-face?! Scripture reveals that Peter, James and John were terrified on that mountaintop. “They knew Jesus as a teacher, a storyteller, a healer and a traveling companion but here on this mountain, they witnessed Jesus becoming at once both fully himself and fully strange. The man they thought they knew was suddenly more, suddenly Other” (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net)). The disciples had witnessed the deeds of Jesus but failed to grasp his full identity and mission as God’s Son. Due to what they saw, Peter, didn’t know what to say. He somehow finds some words and says how good it is to be there. It’s so good that Peter wants to make three permanent dwellings or shrines- one for Jesus, Moses and Elijah- all important figures of faith and all who have encountered God on a mountain. It is oh so tempting to remain...to linger where everything is dazzling and clear (Jan Richardson, *Dazzling*). Peter, James and John want to savor this moment and never let go of it before anything

happens to Jesus! Faced with the possibility of suffering, Peter wants to freeze this moment when Jesus is filled with God's glory as well as to hold onto the two "the twin peaks of Israel's landscape:" one, the greatest lawgiver in her history and the other, the greatest of her prophets: Moses and Elijah. These "thin place" or mountain top experiences are essential to our faith. Yet, we all have to come down the mountain and enter the suffering world. But most of us don't want to enter back into the pain and suffering of our world. Maybe an apocalyptic vision such as this one serves to strengthen our discipleship and to keep it from slipping up when glory looks so much sweeter and pain and failure are so much more likely?! At some points in our walk of discipleship, we will have to be content with mere glimpses or a foretaste of glory divine- of what is to come. Yes, discipleship means to live with ambiguity; living by faith while trusting the One who promises that even in suffering and death, resurrection is to come! Just as Peter wants to settle into this glimpse of heaven, a cloud overshadows them and there is a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved" (9:7a). We've heard this divine voice before from Mark's Gospel when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Except then the voice from heaven speaks directly to Jesus saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). Here God says "This is my Son, the Beloved." But then comes the kicker: "Listen to him." "Apocalyptic visions give you a lot to see, but this one gives you something it really wants you and the three disciples to hear: 'Listen to him'" (Jacobsen). God interrupts Peter, James and John in this moment and for the first and only time in Mark's Gospel, God orders Jesus' disciples to listen to his Beloved Son. Listen to Jesus, who is not only the supreme teacher and prophet but God's Beloved Son: the Messiah, the Savior of God's people! "Listen to him!" After God speaks, the disciples look around and see no

one with them anymore but Jesus. How strange and curious! Here on the mountaintop there's a miracle focused on sight- a visually stimulating experience- a fleeting glimpse of the glory of God and then God comes in the cloud, claims Jesus as his son and commands the disciples to listen to Jesus. They go from seeing to being told to listen to being told not to tell anyone what they had seen until after Jesus' resurrection. I told you this was a strange story.

Who we listen to and allow to shape our thinking, attitude, and worldview is crucially important. God says to listen to Jesus! What does God mean? I wonder if listen here means to be obedient?! Or I wonder if it means that the things Jesus says such as the two greatest commandments which are to "love God with all you've got and to love your neighbor as yourselves" are what we are to listen to?! Maybe listening to Jesus simply means trusting and following him wherever he leads...even to the cross?! Or perhaps it is an invitation to listen not only to Jesus but to our neighbors as well?! As one scholar put it, "Knowing *when to speak and when not to speak* takes practice; it is a spiritual skill learned over time. And each of us must discover it for ourselves. To be told to speak up or to be forced into silence are wrong and hurtful. Jesus didn't tell his friends to shut up to maintain his control of or power over them. He prompted them into a practice of listening -of quiet reflection-that they might better understand" (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage*). More and more- every conference I attend or webinar in which I participate- the message is the same- practice the art of listening. I read a meme recently that read, "The biggest communication problem is that we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply."

Listening to Jesus can come through reading scripture, praying, or creating space in which to encounter God, in worship, through others, in music, in dreams, etc. Singer Michelle Williams sings a Nigerian gospel song called, "Say Yes." The chorus goes, "When Jesus say yes, nobody can say no. When Jesus say yes, nobody can say no" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MZxf-IQD-o>). My colleague and her family, which include her three young daughters, listen to this song often. One day her three year-old was upset that her dad told her no about eating candy. She looked up at him and said, "When Jesus say yes, we don't say no." Out of the very mouths of babes! Many of us have selective listening, don't we?! We listen to what is most convenient for us. To say the least, most of us have some room to grow in learning to listen well.

Igor Stravinsky, a famous conductor and songwriter said, 'To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.' If this is true of music, how much more does it bear on Jesus' commands? It is one thing to admire the Messiah; to obey him is something else" (C. Clifton Black, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Throughout scripture, we're offered many examples of Jesus' commands and teachings. "Follow me." "Feed my sheep." "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." "Make disciples." "Love one another." **How well are we listening to Jesus?** Listening is an act of faith; it is also an art.

When we listen to God through Jesus, our lives are transformed. You never know where or to whom or to what action Jesus is calling you! We may not light up in bright, dazzling clothes but Christ shines in our faces and in our lives causing others to experience Christ's love through us. "Every once and so often,

something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing" (Frederick Buechner, daily e-votional). These strange, rare and often short-lived mountaintop experiences don't just happen. In today's Gospel story and in our everyday lives, God is constantly transforming, or rather transfiguring us, through God's power and love. If we aren't listening to Jesus, how will we know? Perhaps we need to practice listening more? The great preacher Howard Thurman once said, "The true purpose of all spiritual disciplines is to clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us" (*Disciplines of the Spirit*). Maybe this Lent, which is the forty days we journey with Jesus to the cross that starts this coming Wednesday, we could listen to Jesus as a spiritual discipline? Lent is a time- leading up to Easter- of self-examination, self-discipline, and focus on the realities of human sin that made the cross inevitable as God's loving response to our sin. Listening does not result in staying on the mountain "where the air is pure and the view is stunning. We're invited to listen to the voice of God's Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross" (Melinda Quivik, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Maybe we can begin by opening our hearts to what Jesus is asking of us...by opening our ears to where Jesus is leading us to follow...by opening our hands and feet to how Jesus is meeting others' needs through us? Faith is the foundation for our listening hearts. "The bright light of the Transfiguration affirms life, a light that shines ahead into Lent to keep that season in perspective, never without hope and confidence. This light speaks a promise that God is here. And that God is knowable. God seeks relationship, [even in pain and suffering]. Because God is life and love" (Matt Skinner, WP). **May we heed God's command to listen so that when Jesus says yes, we can't say no.** To God be the glory! Amen.