

**Six Days**  
**Matthew 17:1-9**  
**February 19, 2023**

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then 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." <sup>5</sup>While 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!" <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." <sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. <sup>9</sup>As 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."

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

The season of Epiphany begins with Jesus' baptism and ends with the story we just heard, often referred to as "the transfiguration." In three of the four Gospels we hear God's voice affirming Jesus while still dripping wet by baptism. "This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That voice, and those words, echo again in the story of Jesus' transfiguration. Only this time, they are spoken, not to Jesus, but to Peter, James, and John, three of Jesus' disciples. And God's voice thunders to these disciples, "Listen to him!"

The scene is surreal. Jesus invites these three disciples to travel with him up the mountain. There Jesus is transformed into the superhero they so desperately wanted him to be. Reminiscent of Moses after his mountain top encounter with God, Jesus' face shines and he becomes radiant. And then like the Avengers rounding up to save the world, Moses and Elijah join Jesus. "This is so cool," I can imagine Peter thinking as he steps forward with an offer to build shelters for them. But when a cloud descends and God's voice thunders, Peter and the other disciples are reduced to quivering puddles on the ground. They are terrified, so much so, you might wonder if they even heard the part about listening to Jesus.

Then, the spectacle is over. Jesus approaches Peter, James, and John, and offers a comforting touch as he tells them to rise and not be afraid. And as they turn to head down the mountain with Jesus, he tells them not to talk about what just happened until after he has been raised from the dead.

Imagine having this life-altering experience and not being able to tell anyone about it! Not even the other disciples. They heard God's voice. They saw the cloud. There was Moses.

There was Elijah. (I'm not quite sure how they recognized them.) It was a vision of visions. And Jesus says to the disciples, "Let's keep this to ourselves for now."

We never hear of it again. We don't know if Peter, James, and John talk about it later, or share knowing looks. They get the giant neon sign of confirmation...Jesus is the one! There is just one thing left to do...listen to him. Listen to his life. Listen, not just in this moment, but to the sum of all he teaches and does. Listen to him.

But listening is hard.

When our assumptions and core beliefs are challenged. Listening is hard.

When we don't hear what we want to hear. Listening is hard.

When we hear we need to change our ways. Listening is hard.

When the news isn't good, and you are stricken with fear. Listening is hard.

And even when all your doubts have been erased about the credibility and authority of the one to whom we listen, listening is hard...because listening is more than hearing – it is allowing what you hear to shape your life.

The story of the transfiguration happens when listening to Jesus is especially difficult.

It's easy to overlook, but the story of the transfiguration begins with a curious detail. It begins with the words, "Six days later..." It begs the question, "What happened six days earlier?" Those three words let us know that the story that follows is responding to what happened previously. And because the story of transfiguration ends with God thundering, "Listen to him!" I wonder if what happened previously is about not listening or not being able to hear what Jesus is saying.

So back up six days. Six days before this spectacular vision on the mountain, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Peter jumps up saying, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God."

Peter's pronouncement of Jesus as the Messiah is important in the history of the movement that became The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This is the great confession. Many of us were asked as we were baptized or joined the church, "Do you believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and do you proclaim him Lord and Savior?" It is not exactly Peter's words but most certainly inspired by his words.

Yet, like Peter, it is one thing to say it, and quite another to understand what it means. Peter can say with his lips, "You're the one, Jesus!" but difficulty arises as Jesus goes on to explain what that means. This is when it gets hard to listen.

Between Peter's great profession of faith and the spectacle of the transfiguration, we read:

*<sup>21</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance<sup>[b]</sup> to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

*<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? (Matthew 16:21-26)*

Moses confronted Pharaoh. Elijah confronted King Ahab. Jesus goes to Jerusalem. It is there that he confronts the power of Rome and the corrupted religious elite. He confronts and challenges the oppressive powers that keep people poor, sick, and outcast. He confronts the corruption those who have turned religion into a profitable business, extracting the last pennies from people who have nothing left. He confronts the violence of the empire and their iron-fisted rule. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. He makes a scene in the temple. He teaches love and nonviolence. He reminds people of what it means to be faithful to God and to love one another. He sets a table, a table that symbolizes all the meals shared and all the bread broken, and he says, "Remember me." And then he is arrested, executed, and laid in a tomb.

It's not exactly what Peter expected when he made his great confession of faith...and probably not what he hoped for when he dropped his nets to follow Jesus. We can appreciate why it is so hard to listen to Jesus.

We also struggle with listening...

- When we discover that Jesus is not a fast pass to heaven, it's hard to listen.
- When we learn that Jesus isn't our gravy train to the top, it's hard to listen.
- When we realize Jesus isn't an escape hatch from troubles, it's hard to listen.
- When we find out Jesus doesn't help us manifest our every desire, it's hard to listen.
- When we encounter the wrath of the powerful in our attempts to seek justice for the powerless, it's hard to listen.
- When Jesus says being a disciple is costly, it's hard to listen.
- When Jesus teaches that we must love, even our enemies, and forego revenge, it's hard to listen.
- When we are called to act and confront the powers of oppression and injustice, it's hard to listen.
- When love is hard and we are hurt and afraid, it's hard to listen.
- When we see Jesus hanging on the cross, it's hard to listen.

"Listen to him!" the voice from heaven thunders. And like Peter, James and John, we often collapse into fear. And like Peter, James and John, Jesus graciously touches our shoulder and

says, "Rise, do not be afraid, let's keep on going." You see, failure isn't falling down, it is refusing to rise again. Jesus is there, with his gracious touch, assuring us to continue.

Yes, it's hard to listen to Jesus. It takes a lifetime for most of us – a lifetime of falling and getting back up – a lifetime of gracious nudges to rise up, face the fear, and go down to where people are hurting and love is needed.

Yes, it's hard to listen to Jesus...and it's tempting to choose an easier path – tempting to decide Jesus didn't know what he was talking about. Yet, we have this moment, this vision, with Peter, James, and John, where it is abundantly clear. This is the one! "My beloved!" says God. "Listen to him." He will lead you to the kingdom.

May we have ears to hear...may we listen to Jesus.

Before I sit down, I want to pause to acknowledge the passing of Bev Weatherill. I had the privilege of visiting with her about her life before she died. She told me the motto by which she lived and the legacy she hoped to leave. It was: "If I can help, why not?"

I believe that Bev listened to Jesus, often inviting complete strangers to live in her home, not afraid to engage people with messy lives and complicated histories. Sometimes it cost her. At age 94 she stood at our Regional Assembly in support of the LGBTQ+ community. She heard loud and clear Jesus' command to love one another and she shed the trappings of religion and being right to get to what she saw as the purpose of life – to what Jesus taught – love. "It's all about love," she said. "It's all about love."

May her life inspire us to listen to the one who calls us to love. Amen.