

“God Says, Listen!”

February 7, 2016

Word of God Speak series – Transfiguration Sunday

It was some days after Jesus explained how he would suffer that Jesus goes up the mountain to pray – to seek God. He takes Peter, James, and John, and it is a powerful encounter. The three disciples witness that hope and promise come together in Jesus. He is the fulfillment of history, and this Transfiguration is a celebration of who Jesus is, but not without the reminder of what that means. The glory that the disciples experience is real, but this is just a preview of the full glory of Christ after his death and resurrection.

And the words spoke by the voice are important: “Listen to him!” The disciples have heard Jesus speak of his impending suffering and death. And on the mountaintop, it’s easy to believe that it’s all going to be okay. When we’re in the spiritual highs of life, *Life is good. God is good. All is well.*

Peter offers to build three shelters on the mountain – maybe as a way to prolong the experience or to assure that it might happen again. And we’re tempted, too – to try to capture the spiritual highs of our lives and stay there for a while. But being a faithful disciple isn’t about freezing moments in time, but going on in faith and relying on those moments to strengthen us for serving God.

That same voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism speaks again: “This is my Son, the Beloved,” but then the voice says, “Listen to him!” And let’s be clear: this means what’s called “active listening” – not just hearing what Jesus says, but actually listening to him and internalizing what he says.

Listening means following him closely, learning from him, and continuing his work. Listening means understanding that following Jesus will take us into places of sacrifice and suffering. Jesus will die on the cross for the sins of the whole world, which the disciples struggle with throughout their time with him. It’s before this event that Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, but then is surprised when Jesus says that he must suffer and die. And after this event, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be condemned to death.

We want to stay on the mountain, but life happens – illness, bad news, relationship struggles, loss and grief, and all the rest, and it’s not so easy to believe. It’s hard to trust, and it’s tough to speak of our faith. Perhaps that’s the reason for the command to listen to Jesus. He will go to the cross, and it will be difficult for the disciples to stay with him, to trust him, to follow him.

But that’s precisely where we claim Good News – that God would show us grace – and show grace to the whole world – by choosing a path of suffering so that we might have a relationship with God. God chooses to suffer to reconcile all of humanity to himself through Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross – for you, for me, for all.

And if we listen and follow Jesus, then we can expect that the journey of faith won't be simple to travel or easy to understand. We know the story, and so when we commit our lives to Jesus, there's a cost. The journey is not certain in terms of where we'll go, whom we'll encounter, how we'll be challenged in faith, but we claim the promised gift of eternal life – life lived in God's presence and peace.

We can talk about the power of those mountaintop experiences, but Jesus and Peter, James, and John don't stay on the mountaintop. Perhaps the mountain is a place where we see the larger vision. But we don't stay there. We come down to everyday life. Perhaps the valley is where we serve. They come down to meet the needs of people and to be signs of God's Kingdom on earth.

They come down and face the reality that there are people who are hurting. There are people who need to be healed. There are people who are scared. There are people who are uncertain. And there are people who believe in Jesus.

Perhaps our focus shouldn't be just on those powerful experiences, but even more on the everyday experiences of God's glory. Where have you seen God's glory today or in this past week? Where has God been real to you? Where have you felt the presence of Christ near to you? How has your relationship with God made the difference this week?

This account of the Transfiguration – when Jesus appearance changes – makes me consider those moments when I've felt God's presence very near to me. It happens in times of prayer, of holy conversation, of celebration, of profound struggle, of profound joy.

But it's hard to describe. I have no adequate words to describe those powerful encounters with God. We can try, but our reactions matter more. We can share these encounters as best we can with words, but it's our faithful witness of God's ongoing presence and power that makes the difference. Maybe it's enough to say that we have seen God's glory and then try to respond to it in some way that points to God.

This week, we saw Blue Man Group in Grand Rapids. For those of you who aren't familiar with it, Blue Man Group is performance art, but it's more than that. It's an experience. It was pouring rain on Tuesday night when we ran from the parking garage across the wet streets into DeVos Hall. It was cold and wet, but when we got inside, there was this on the screen a quote from a book called "The Social Synapse":

"If you would like to establish a connection with people from another culture, it's always good to offer a few gifts as a gesture of friendship. But, an even better way to forge a lasting bond is by creating something together. Whether it's a meal, an art project or a spontaneous dance party, when you create with others, you create a connection that lasts a lifetime."

And that's what happened in the course of 90 minutes. Even before the actual performance, there was a marriage proposal. We witnessed something beautiful. There was joy and laughter as we watched the performance. All of us in the theater were a part of what was happening, and it was really a beautiful experience. And when we went out, it was still raining - wet and cold. But the experience was something to remember - for us as a family, for the community created in that hall.

I think that's what happened for Jesus and the disciples. They shared a powerful moment. And even though the disciples might not have understood it fully, it was something to hold onto in all that was ahead. Surely it was something they would go back to and talk about later when they experienced the hope and glory of Jesus' resurrection after the pain of his crucifixion and death.

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we recognize our mortality, confess our sin, and seek God's help in changing our lives all over again. We hear "remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return."

When we worship, when we pray, when we study Scripture together, when we come to the table, we move out of our self-focused world and closer to God because we're seeking God. That's what brings change in you and me. It's through our attention to spiritual disciplines and spiritual growth that we find ourselves being transformed into the people God seeks for us to be – faithful and fruitful.

Friends, we are meant to shine - not to show ourselves as faithful on our own, but to show that God is faithful. One writer says that we are "made for the glory of God – to be glory-bearing, glory-reflecting, glory-bound." And it's God's glory that shines through us as we build God's Kingdom by what we say and do. When God says "listen!" we must. Theologian Karl Barth says that it is God who makes us radiant. "We ourselves cannot put on bright faces. But neither can we prevent them from shining. Looking up to God, our faces shine."

May we look to God. May we listen to God. May we seek God. May we shine with the glory of God. Thanks be to God. AMEN.