

**Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C**  
**Transfiguration Sunday**  
**March 3, 2019**  
**St. James, Wheat Ridge**

In the coming week, churches around the world,  
including Saint James,  
will undergo quite a transformation.  
Our liturgical calendar is moving from the glorious season after Epiphany  
to the somber season of Lent.  
We'll pack away the "Alleluias,"  
and switch to "Lord have mercy."  
We'll put aside our fine silver chalices  
and pull out the modest ceramic ones.  
Everything gets simpler, more contemplative,  
more silent during Lent.

Our lectionary will lead us away from this morning's mountaintop  
experience of Jesus transfigured by the glory of God.  
Instead, we'll travel through the valley of the shadow of death,  
and ultimately to Jerusalem,  
where the cross and the tomb await.

Lent weighs heavily on us.  
It urges us to recall the suffering and death of our Lord.  
So, in many ways, we arrive at this final Sunday before Lent  
with a mix of anticipation and anxiety,  
a combination of joy and dread.  
But really, that puts us right in the same place  
where Peter and James and John find themselves this morning.

It's tempting to believe that the chosen disciples  
were just out for a merry little jaunt up the mountain with Jesus.  
Jesus said he was going up there to pray,  
and wouldn't you love to be invited along on a prayer retreat with Jesus?  
Wouldn't that be a wonderful outing?

But remember that just a week before –  
about eight days, according to Luke –  
Jesus had laid some very hard news on these disciples.

He had told them that he would have to undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and then rise from the dead.

“If any want to become my followers,” Jesus said to them, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

Peter, James and John could not help but remember these words as they're invited to follow their Lord up to the mountaintop. They may still be in a state of shock, or possibly denial. Whatever their emotional state, they're not out for a frolic. This is some serious business.

When they reach the top of the mountain, the Gospel tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them. The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Apparently this is a side effect of coming into close contact with God. The description of Jesus's radiance is surely meant to remind us of what happened to Moses when he was on the mountain with God, receiving the law. We're told the skin of his face became so shiny that people were afraid to come near him. He had to put a veil over his face to knock some of the shine off.

And just to make sure we understand that this is no coincidence, to make sure we understand the connection between Moses, who gave the law, and Jesus, who came to fulfill the law, here comes Moses himself, to remove all doubt. And he's accompanied by Elijah, greatest of all the Old Testament prophets; Elijah, who got taken up into that whirlwind. No coincidence there either. We're meant to understand the connection between Jesus and the law and the prophets.

But just as he does time after time,  
 if something seems clear as a bell to us  
 all these many centuries later,  
 leave it to Peter to not get it.  
 Leave it to Peter to say the wrong thing at the wrong time.

“Master, it is good for us to be here,” Peter says,  
 “Let us make three dwellings,  
 one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

You know, in fairness to Peter,  
 what would YOU have said  
 if you’d found yourself suddenly standing in the presence  
 of the three people in the whole world  
 known to have encountered God up close and personal-like.  
 I’m sure I wouldn’t have been especially articulate either.

Besides, Peter just wants to protect Jesus.  
 Who can blame him?  
 And he wants to hold onto this moment,  
 this incredible moment  
 when they have seen a glimpse of God’s glory for themselves.  
 Alas, you just can’t hang on to something like that.  
 You can’t put it in a box or in a house  
 to make it last longer.  
 Glimpsing the glory of God is, of necessity, a fleeting thing.

And so, just like that, a cloud comes and overshadows them all,  
 and they were terrified.  
 Then from somewhere within that cloud comes a voice:  
 “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.”

Then notice what happens next:  
 As the disciples came down from the mountaintop,  
 they didn’t rush into the closest town  
 and tell the first person they saw about what they had just witnessed.  
 They didn’t wait until Jesus wasn’t looking to talk about it.  
 And they didn’t take to Social Media with the news.  
 Luke’s Gospel tells us that

they “told no one any of the things they had seen.”

Now, many biblical scholars interpret their silence as a mark of fear over what they had seen and heard.

And that’s certainly plausible.

That, and the fact that people would surely have thought them crazy if they’d tried to describe what they’d seen.

How does one speak of something that human language simply has no words for?

But I’m going out on a limb here and thinking there may be even more to it than that. What if Peter’s and James’ and John’s silence was the very thing that allowed them to be obedient to God’s command?

The disciples had heard God say,  
 “This is my Son, my chosen; *listen* to him!”  
 So instead of running and telling the world what they had seen what if they chose instead to obey; to be silent so they could listen?

In a world filled with noise,  
 a world where we compete with one another to see who can shout the loudest,  
 where often as not we use our words to stir up anger and fear and mistrust,  
 maybe this is the word from the Lord that we need to hear.

God beckons us, ever so gently: *Listen*.  
 Imagine what the world might look like if we listened more — not in preparation to respond, to think about what we’re going to say next, but in order to understand.

What might our politics look like if we listened more and argued less?  
 What might our schools look like if we taught our children how to listen as intently and deliberately as we teach them how to speak and to write?

And what might our churches look like  
if we listened intently for the voice of God  
coming from those who differ from us?

In his book, *Bread for the Journey*, the Catholic priest and theologian Henri  
J.M. Nouwen writes:

“To listen is very hard,  
because it asks of us so much interior stability  
that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments,  
statements, or declarations.

True listeners no longer have an inner need  
to make their presence known.

They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept...

The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to  
start feeling accepted,  
start taking their words more seriously  
and discovering their own true selves.

Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality  
by which you invite strangers to become friends,  
to get to know their inner selves more fully,  
and even to dare to be silent with you.”

As our Lenten journey approaches,  
and the chaos of the world presses in  
with voices of anger and intolerance and hatred  
blaring from our televisions and our computer screens,  
may we remember how to listen.

For it is in listening that we truly hear one another.  
And it is in listening that we hear the voice of God.