

May We Keep Listening

By: Rachel Helton

February 23, 2020. We're ending the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany, which are often mountaintop experience times of the church year. Rachel Helton preaches today on the richness of the Transfiguration of Jesus, about the new covenant that will be made through his sacrifice and death, and about listening to what God is asking of us today.

Readings: [Genesis 1](#), [Exodus 24:12-18](#), [Matthew 16:21](#), [Matthew 17:1-9](#)

*** Transcript ***

Won't you pray with me? Eternal God, open our minds to hear your word, our hearts to love your word, our lives to be obedient to your word, through the power of your Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

As many of you already know, in my life before St. Louis, I was a pediatrician. And in life before pediatrics, I was, obviously, a medical student. The first two years of medical school are the pre-clinical years, the years that you spend in lectures and labs and classrooms learning first all about how the body works, and second, learning about how illness disrupts that normal functioning and what we as practitioners of medicine can do to restore health. It's a little bit overgeneralized maybe, but that's the basic idea. And the point is, when you make it to the third year, to the *clinical* year, you finally get to see actual patients. And that is a pretty exciting thing. As a medical student you spend time rotating through different specialties trying to figure out which one feels like the best fit for you and hopefully gleaning some knowledge from each one along the way.

I was several weeks into my OB rotation when one afternoon my pager beeped notifying me that there was a woman nearing delivery. I met up with the obstetrician I was working with and as we walked to the woman's room he said very casually, "You wanna catch this one?" This is kind of a big deal for a medical student. "Catching" the baby means that you get to be the hands that guide that new life into the world. Now truth be told, and I'm sure he knew this, the woman whose room we were going to already had several children and probably could have delivered this baby without any help from anyone. But still, I was very excited to agree to this, and I'm sure my hands were shaking through the entire delivery. Once the baby was born and the nurse had clamped and cut the cord, I stood there, gazing at this screaming, squirming baby girl through tear-filled eyes, experiencing something about life that I had not experienced before. There was something so beautiful in that moment, something I still can't quite put into words, and I just wanted to stay there in that moment. And I probably would have stayed there even longer had the OB not interrupted my moment and said, "We usually hand the baby to the mom." Oh right, the mom! And my world suddenly spun back to reality and the tasks at hand and the busyness of the day.

I can't help but to wonder if that might be a glimpse of what Peter experienced at the Transfiguration of Jesus. First he and two other disciples followed Jesus up the mountain. Many important events had happened on mountains — Moses receiving the Commandments, Abraham and the near-sacrifice of Isaac, the Sermon on the Mount, after all. What might the disciples have been expecting this time? They probably weren't expecting what happened next. We need to remember that just a few days before this Jesus had predicted his own suffering and death to the disciples. If we flip back just one page, to Matthew chapter 16, we can read, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he

must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

So when Jesus takes Peter and James and John up on a high mountain and is transfigured, his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming dazzling white, and then he is joined by Moses and Elijah — these pillars of the faith, is it any surprise that Peter, in his usual earnest fashion, wants to make dwelling places for them? Is it any surprise that he wants to just stay right there for a moment, stay in that moment of experiencing something so holy, of perhaps being transformed by the undeniable truth that Jesus is God? And Peter wants to *do* something, he wants to build something. And then is interrupted by the voice of God coming from the clouds saying, "This is my Son... *listen* to him." In the Greek form of the verb translated "listen" is not just listen to him right now. It's *keep* listening to him. We've heard this proclamation of "This is my Son" before coming from the heavens, haven't we. This is the same thing that was spoken at the baptism of Jesus which we heard about at the beginning of Epiphany back in January when God speaks from the heavens saying this, this *human*, is my son.

Upon hearing the voice of God at the Transfiguration, we are told that the disciples fall to the ground "in fear" which is about more than just feeling scared, it's about showing reverence and adoration to the God who is speaking to them from the clouds and the God being revealed in the transfigured Jesus. And then Jesus reaches out to them in their fear and touches them. As this happens Jesus is suddenly alone again, meaning Moses and Elijah are gone. This is such an important part of the nature of Jesus as God made man, that he physically reached out and touched people in a way that brought reassurance and healing. It's not the gloriously shining Jesus who reaches out to them either, but the very human Jesus who they have come to trust as a good friend and have been willing to follow as disciples. As they continue to follow him, back down the mountain, back into a violent, broken world, into a place of suffering they've been transformed by his Transfiguration.

There's so much richness in the event of the Transfiguration, isn't there? It's about more than just Jesus shining in glory, although that is certainly true. It's about the new covenant that will be made through his sacrifice and death. It's about the fulfillment of the law and the prophecies of the Old Testament — the law which was delivered through Moses, the prophecies which were spoken by Elijah. The Transfiguration happened on the seventh day after Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer and die in Jerusalem. And this number seven is significant — we see it other times in the Bible. The easiest to recall probably is Genesis 1, when we see the creation of all things in seven days. But we also see it in the reading from Exodus this morning — Moses is on Mount Sinai and on the seventh day the voice of God calls to him. The number seven represents wholeness, completion. So it's fitting that the Transfiguration happens on the seventh day because Jesus is revealed in his wholeness — as fully human, fully God — and he confirms that he will bring to completion the work of our salvation, the work of making us truly whole.

We're ending the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany which are often "mountain-top" experience times of the church year. And at least for me personally, it's not hard to want to follow the Jesus that we focus on December through February. But as we begin the journey toward the cross and Lent, as we descend the mountain so to speak, down into the valley of our world of injustice and oppression, it can be difficult to follow Jesus into the hard places. Sometimes we experience God in bright, shining moments... other times, like the Magi following the star, we are provided only enough light to know where our very next step should be. As we take each step, even in the ordinary moments of life, we are transformed into the people God created us to be, not because we transform ourselves but because transformation happens *to* us.

And as we are transformed by the Spirit through experiences in our lives and through encounters with the word and the sacraments, we gain a deeper understanding of the love of God and the mission of Jesus. We can be the hands of Jesus — reaching out to a fearful people. We can do this right here in our own city. We can do this right here in our own community and in our church and in our own homes.

The God of Moses is the same God of the Transfiguration is the same God of today. The essence of God revealed in the Old Testament is that of a persistently loving and gracious God who gives mercy to a persistently rebellious and broken world. The essence of Jesus revealed in the New Testament is that of a God who cares deeply about all people and reaches out to those who are sick, afraid, marginalized, and restores them to wholeness. He does that for us too. That's what salvation is about, after all.

As we prepare for the season of Lent and journey to the cross, I hope we have moments of awe as we experience the transfigured Jesus in all his glory. But I hope we also have quiet times of turning inward, of listening for what it is that God might be asking us to do. How might God be asking us to feed God's people? How might God be asking us to literally clothe God's people with coats and blankets on the streets of St. Louis on cold nights where the temperatures are in the teens? How is God asking us to see and stand with people who are living on the margins of our society? How is God asking us to reorient our lives toward love and truth and mercy? How is it that God might be asking us to bear witness to the good news of salvation?

God is still speaking; may we listen. May we *keep* listening. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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