

Listen to Him!

Matthew 17:1-8

Some years ago, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church--USA was Marj Carpenter. On a trip to visit Presbyterian mission sites in Africa, her plane arrived later than expected in one of the African countries, either Ghana or Kenya. This meant she and those with her would be getting out to a village well after midnight. They left the capital city on a moonless night and traveled a while on a fairly good, paved road, then onto a somewhat-graveled road, and off that onto a not-much-more than a wide, dirt path. After considerable time--she said it seemed like hours--they were to make one more turn and go about ¼ mile into a village. As they got closer to the final turn off, they saw some lights ahead. And when they got to the lights, they now saw that the people of the village had brought torches and flashlights and lanterns and lined themselves across from each other, creating a lane of light from the dirt path up into the village.

Since there was no road, and there was no light on this moonless night, they became the road. Together, they became the lighted way shining in the darkness. Marj said it was one of the most beautiful and welcome sights she had ever seen--and she saw a Christian meaning of it in the moment. These followers of Jesus made themselves of service in his name to bring others safely into their fellowship and to minister to them. They became “transfigured”--as it were--to welcome and bring in those in the night.

Now in this event of Jesus we read--known as the Transfiguration--there is a parallel to that story, and to our sermon series from the Sermon on the Mount beginning with the Beatitudes. So what is the Transfiguration? “*Six days later...*” Matthew says. But “*six days*” after what? Well, it has been six days since Jesus with all the

disciples, put a crucial question to them-- "*Who do you say that I am?*" he asked them (Mt 16:13). And Simon Peter answered, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.*" Matthew continues: "*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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke [Jesus], saying, 'God forbid it, Lord!' This must never happen to you.'* And he turned and said to Peter, '*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things,*'" (Mt 16:14 -16, 21-23).

So, "*six days*" after that! The disciples believe Jesus is the Messiah. Peter confessed correctly. But as is clear from the exchange afterward, they don't understand what Jesus says about going to Jerusalem to be rejected, condemned, and to die. They want a Messiah who will do for them according to their expectations. Clearly, Jesus understands his role as Messiah differently. Thus, "*six days later*" Jesus took Peter, James and John, and led them to a high mountain..." (vs.1) and this event happened. Peter writes of this years later in a letter, "*...we [were] eyewitnesses of his majesty.... when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying 'This is my son, my Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.'* We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain," (2 Pet 17-18).

Jesus "*was transfigured right there in front of them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes got white as light,*" (vs.2). Here, for the only time in his career on earth, Jesus essential glory is made--in this dazzling way--visible to the disciples. Nowhere else does Jesus shine and glow. But here once in his life, Jesus is showered

with light. And then, Matthew says, “*Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking together with Jesus.*” That is, it is to the disciples, to them and for them, that this appearance happens.

Why Moses and Elijah? They were recognized as the supreme representatives of the God’s Word to Israel--Moses the Lawgiver, and Elijah who, after Moses, was the first in the series of the great voices of God to the people of Israel. Further, God promises one day to raise up a prophet like Moses who is to be listened to! (DT 18:15). By the prophet Malachi, Elijah was foretold as to be sent before the great Day of the Lord bringing his kingdom to this earth (Mal 4:5). It is clearly understood here that God’s New Voice and Prophet is this Jesus. Both men stand with Jesus, as if pointing to him, the culmination of all that the Law and the Prophets had stood for and superior to them as well. The forerunners have done their task. They can disappear now that the principal figure has arrived. And then they disappear and leave Jesus only, as we read (17:8).

Here, what happened is to and for the disciples. Seeing Jesus’ glory and hearing God’s voice was for their sake--for their sake, after they must have still been wondering why Jesus could talk about being Messiah and yet go to Jerusalem to be rejected and killed. They want to do everything they can to keep Jesus from the cross. But--as Jesus makes clear--if we try to keep Jesus from the cross, then we are opposed to God’s will and purpose. We don’t understand Jesus either, what he is about, but neither do we understand what we as followers of Jesus are to be about as well.

“*Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings...one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’*” Mark’s gospel comments in telling this same event, “*Peter didn’t know what he was talking about...and*

was frightened,” (Mk 9:6). But why is Peter talking at all?! Why doesn’t he just listen to what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are saying?! Matthew doesn’t say. Rather, Peter comes up with this “edifice” scheme, to build something; he seems to want to commemorate the moment. Maybe he just wants to stay there a while! Who knows! But maybe, too, it’s a way of getting out of going to Jerusalem--and die.

Matthew says “*while Peter still was speaking...*” This sentence is meant to be funny. In the Greek, the word “still” is put at the first of the sentence to emphasize Peter’s ongoing yack. The Gospel writers knew Peter was always--and would always be--a talker. Matthew implies, “*God can’t wait for Peter to stop jabbering on, so he interrupts or he will never get in a word at all!*” So then and in spite of Peter’s blabber, “*a bright shining cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son the Beloved; with whom I am pleased.’*” And then is added the very important command, “*Listen to him!*”

Clearly, by God’s command, Jesus is marked out as in a different category from Moses and Elijah. The echo of Isaiah 42:1--the words “*in whom I am well pleased*”--recalls the figure of the Suffering Servant of God. Jesus must suffer and be killed as Messiah. Hard as it is to accept, the disciples must accept this. They are right to follow Jesus. He is the Messiah. But they must “*listen to him.*” This is what this Story--as well as the entire Matthew Story--is about. The response that God wishes of those disciples--and us disciples, too--to his priceless Son is that the response that listens to Jesus with the faith of obedience. It’s the same point Jesus makes many times when he instructs with parables and other teaching, often concluding with the words, “*He who has ears, let him hear!*”

Jesus is not just a servant of the Word as Moses and Elijah. Jesus IS the Father's Word, so "Listen to him!" The final three words of the story, "*Jesus himself alone,*" confirm both a return to normality, but more importantly the superiority of Jesus. The presence of Moses and Elijah was only temporary, both in the past and now here in this incident. Now the Messiah has come onto the stage. But his mission will not be accomplished in heavenly glory on the mountain--as much as Peter or we might want--but in the very familiar, sometimes disappointing, conditions of this earthly life.

Now, the verses that follow the command are very interesting: "*When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, and said, 'Get up and do not be afraid,'*" (vss.6-7). In a way, the entire gospel is present in these words. Hear the Good News! God himself has come up to us, gripped us, and told us to get up on our feet and do not be afraid anymore!

For Jesus shines not just to shine, nor just to impress his importance upon us, not even in the final analysis to make us obedient in majesty. *No, Jesus shines especially to help us out, to put us on our feet, to enable us to live again, so we may shine with him.* To shine in this sense is to live out his will, even as He lived out the Father's will. It is to fulfill what Jesus said to the disciples, "*You are the light of the world,*" (Mt 5:14). We are the light when we hear and do Jesus' words (Mt 7:24).

In the Christian Calendar, this Sunday is called "The Transfiguration of the Lord." It is the Sunday in which this text is designated for preaching before we begin the season of Lent. The Christian Church, in its wisdom, understands we need to grasp something of the meaning of the Transfiguration--and the command of God to listen to Jesus--before we embark--as did the disciples--on the road to Jerusalem and what awaits Jesus

there--and us, too.

Like Peter, we must learn to see the glory in the cross, and the cross in the glory. And when we do, we will have begun to bring together the laughter and the tears of God who hides in the cloud, the God who is to be known, and can only really be known, in the person to whom God directs our attention and says, "*Listen to him!*" We need to learn to recognize on both mountain-tops--the Mount of Transfiguration and Mount Calvary--the same power, love, and beauty within Jesus God wants for us. We need to hear it in his voice on the mountain as he talks with Moses and Elijah, and we need to hear it when he cries out on the Cross. And we need to hear it when he tells us to take up the cross and follow him as well.

Now this command of God to these disciples speaks to us disciples as it pertains to the Beatitudes as well. For as I have been saying, the Beatitudes are first of all declarations about life in this world when the Kingdom Jesus brings is realized, when those who hear his words and do them conform their lives to the commands of their King. Paul calls us "ambassadors" for Christ. Jesus calls us "disciples." And to a real extent, what the world is meant to know about God and his extraordinary message of love, it knows--for better or worse--through us. The work of God awaits our hands. The love of God awaits our hearts, and the people of God await our fellowship here and now, ordinary and imperfect as it may be. The Beatitudes challenge the Church to really be God's People, for people to discover their true vocation as the New People of God in the world, and do so by following the way and manner of the One they call, "Lord." All the more reason we must, if we are his disciples, "listen to him!--Jesus", and so also--wonder of wonders--find ourselves "transfigured" with the light and love of Jesus, and so

welcome and bring in those in the night. So also, we must remember it is Christ who makes this possible. It is not living the Christian life that makes us Christian women and men. It is Christ in us first, who empowers us to live out the full meaning of the Lordship of Christ, overturning the paradigms of the world and revealing God's love that reconciles all things. And so we come again to this Table recognizing that very reality. Christ in us, the hope of the world. Amen.