

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Best of Both Worlds”
The Rev. Amy Morgan
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Luke 9:28-43

28Now about eight days after these sayings

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James,
and went up on the mountain to pray.

29And while he was praying,

the appearance of his face changed,
and his clothes became dazzling white.

30Suddenly they saw two men,

Moses and Elijah,
talking to him.

31They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure,
which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

32Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep;
but since they had stayed awake,

they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

33Just as they were leaving him,

Peter said to Jesus,

“Master, it is good for us to be here;
let us make three dwellings,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”
—not knowing what he said.

34While he was saying this,

a cloud came and overshadowed them;
and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

35Then from the cloud came a voice that said,

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

36When the voice had spoken,

Jesus was found alone.

And they kept silent

and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

37On the next day,

when they had come down from the mountain,
a great crowd met him.

38Just then a man from the crowd shouted,

“Teacher, I beg you to look at my son;
he is my only child.

39Suddenly a spirit seizes him,
and all at once he shrieks.

It convulses him until he foams at the mouth;
it mauls him and will scarcely leave him.

40I begged your disciples to cast it out,
but they could not.”

41Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation,
how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?
Bring your son here.”

42While he was coming,

the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions.

But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit,

healed the boy,

and gave him back to his father.
43And all were astounded at the greatness of God.
If there are only nine words in all of scripture that God wants us to hear,
they are these:

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

Leslie Butler, our Nursery School Director,
has told me that the way you get a child to listen to you
is to get down on the child’s level,
put your hands on either side of his or her face,
and turn their face toward you
so you have their full attention.

That feels like what God is doing here with the disciples.

Everything on the mountaintop
represents a crystal-clear picture of who Jesus is.

Jesus goes up the mountain to pray,
showing the disciples that he is God’s servant –
he talks to God and listens to God.
He gets his power and authority from God.

Then Jesus is transfigured.
His face shines
like the face of Moses
after his encounters with God.
His clothes become dazzlingly white,
showing the disciples
the glory of God
that shines from within Jesus.
Not only does Jesus reflect God’s glory,
Jesus himself is the light of the world.

Then Moses and Elijah show up.
Now, while this might not be so obvious to us today,
for Peter, John, and James,
this was an unmistakable symbol
that Jesus is
the fulfillment of the Law represented in Moses
and the Prophets represented in Elijah.

It’s like God is holding up celestial flash cards saying:
“Son of God;” “Listen to him.”

Luke’s gospel seems sometimes to be obsessed with the question of Jesus’ identity.

There is this extended birth narrative
filled with angelic visitations and prophecies and predictions.
Strangers in the temple and prophets from the wilderness
talk about who Jesus is.
God speaks to Jesus in his baptism,
identifying him as God’s Beloved Son.

Then, after all this build-up about how holy and miraculous and great Jesus is,
Luke gives us a human genealogy for Jesus,
tracing his family history all the way back to Adam, son of God.

In his hometown, people start asking,
 “Who is this guy? Isn’t he just Joseph’s son?”

This is followed by more stories of healing and miracles,
 and more questions about Jesus’ identity.
The Pharisees want to know why Jesus thinks he’s great enough to forgive sins ,
 and then they turn around
 and want to know why Jesus is so lowly
 as to dine with tax collectors and sinners.

John the Baptist, in prison,
 wants to know who Jesus is.
 Herod wants to know who Jesus is.
 Jesus wants to know who people say that he is.
 Then he wants to know who his disciples think he is.

We think Peter wins final Jeopardy
 by correctly answering that Jesus is the Messiah of God,
 but then Jesus starts talking about his suffering and death,
 and the disciples get all confused again.

Who is this Jesus guy?
Everybody loves him,
 and then people hate him.
He’s the Son of God
 and the Son of Man.
He’s holy and righteous,
 but he hangs out with sinners.
He’s confusing everybody.
 He’s a walking contradiction.

But here on the mountaintop,
 God makes things clear and simple for Peter, John and James,
 the three super special disciples.
Shining clothes. Changed appearance. Law and Prophets.

All this clearly equals Son of God
 fulfilling God’s plan for reconciling the world.

And then the disciples get distracted with building blocks.
 “Let’s build tents for everybody!” Peter says.

So God gets down on the disciples’ level,
 enveloping them in a cloud.
God puts holy hands on their cheeks
 as they are overshadowed
 and all distractions are blocked out.

And God says to them,
 “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

It doesn’t get much clearer or simpler than that, now does it?

Well, apparently, it’s not clear enough.
 Because the disciples are not transformed by the transfiguration.
They go on to fail to understand Jesus and God’s kingdom,
 bicker about greatness, and, in the end,
 deny Jesus on his way to the cross.
They might be *hearing* Jesus,
 but they’re not *listening* to him.

When I tell my four-year-old he needs to listen to me,
I don't mean that he needs to hear the words I'm saying.
I know he hears me just fine.
What I mean is that he needs to *do* what I say.
Usually, this involves putting on some article of clothing. (*pause*)

Likewise, when God tells the disciples to listen to Jesus,
the point is that they need to *do* what Jesus has been saying all along,
not just hear his words and go on doing whatever they please.

But that's not so easy.
Because, as we've seen,
Jesus is full of contradictions.
If they had been listening to Jesus,
they would have heard him say
"Blessed are you who are poor, and the hungry, and those who weep.
Woe to those who are rich, and those who are full,
and those who laugh and those who are popular."
They would have heard him make contradictory statements like
"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

But they weren't listening for a contradiction.
They were listening for a military and political king.
They were listening for Jesus to be human or divine,
but certainly not both.
They were listening for Jesus to follow the Law and Prophets,
but not fulfill them in messy, conflicted ways.

When we come to Jesus,
we have trouble listening for the contradictions, too.

We live in a world of contradictions.

We are rich in things,
but we obsess about what we don't have.
We are constantly connected via email and texting and cell phones,
but we are the loneliest people on the planet.
We have access to more information than at any other time in history,
and yet we read and comprehend less than we did a generation ago.

Amidst all these contradictions,
we listen for a Jesus who is simple, direct, and one-dimensional.
We hear Jesus say, "blessed are the poor,"
and we go right on supporting the systems and institutions that keep us rich.
We hear Jesus say, "blessed are the hungry"
and go right on consuming.
We hear Jesus say, "blessed are those who mourn"
and go right on seeking our personal happiness above all else.
We hear,
but we don't listen.
Because we don't want Jesus to be yet another contradiction,
complicating our lives even further.

In Christ, God is revealed to us as a great contradiction.

This is what the disciples failed to grasp and take down with them from the mountain top.
They could grasp that God was great and holy and mighty and transcendent.
They could grasp that Jesus was present and active in the world
and reached into the world's darkness to bring light to it.
But they couldn't put the two together.
They couldn't understand a God who would
soil holy hands,
bleed righteous blood,
weep immortal tears.

Part of our listening problem is that the contradiction we find in Christ –
humble yet exalted; powerful yet vulnerable; authoritative yet submissive –
strikes a chord with us.

In Christ's contradictory nature
we find our own nature reflected.

We have illusions of grandeur
accompanied by the sense that we are just a cog in the wheel of a great machine.

We are made in God's image,
and yet we can't control the world around us
and we can't overcome our desire to do those things
that distance us from God and from each other.

God made us "a little lower than the angels" as it says in the 8th Psalm,
and then Jesus declares in exasperation
"You faithless and perverse generation,
how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?"

We are confusing creatures.

We are walking contradictions.

And we don't want God to be like us.

We want God to be one thing or another.

We want God to provide the clarity and distinction
we feel we're lacking.

But if God were not contradictory,

God would make no sense in this world of contradictions.

It is precisely because God is contradictory
that we are able to make sense of ourselves and our world.

It is because we share God's contradictory nature
that we are able to listen to God's Son,
to take this Word and let it live in our lives and work power in our world.

Listening to Christ means that faith is a verb, not a noun.

When I first met with the pastor of my church in Brooklyn,
we sat in the church sanctuary and chatted awhile,
getting to know each other.

Then he said, "I've got someplace I want to show you.

This will be *your* place."

Thinking he would lead me to some secluded prayer nook,

I followed happily,

looking forward to discovering this place of solitude and retreat.

Instead, he led me to the church's Sunday School meeting room.

It was sort of like a smaller sanctuary behind the sanctuary.

"Isn't this great?" he beamed.

"You can put on plays here!"

He had told me earlier that it was his belief that

artists find faith in art,

writers in books,

and philosophers in theology.

I was an actress.

I was to find faith in theatre.

And he was giving me the place to do it.

My dream for this church

is that each of us can find our place here.

Not our place where we come for private interaction with God.

Not our place where we come to hear God.

My dream is that this is where we come to listen to God's Son,
to *do* what Jesus said.

I hope the artists listen to Jesus in art,
the teachers listen to Jesus in teaching.

I hope the accountants listen to Jesus in our finances,
the parents listen to Jesus in raising children,

I hope the marketers listen to Jesus in promoting the gospel,
and the scientists listen to Jesus in discovering how the world works.
and the doctors listen to Jesus in healing.

Here is where we come to listen to God.

Here is where God gets down on our level,
places holy hands on our cheeks,
and demands our full attention.

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.”