

Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday
February 11, 2018

The Art of Listening

Psalm 50:1-6; Mark 9:2-9

Once again this year, entirely by coincidence,
we have managed to schedule Scout Sunday on Transfiguration Sunday.
As I said last year,
it's befitting since on Transfiguration Sunday we remember the time
when Jesus and his disciples went for a hike up in the mountains.

As Scouts and other outdoorsy types know very well
the beauty and grandeur of God's creation
can bring us into communion with God
in deep and powerful ways.

[Of course, if our visiting Scouts would like to hear a sermon
on some other passage of scripture than the Transfiguration
when they come to Fourth,
maybe next year we should consider a different date for Scout Sunday!]

Jesus might have enjoyed being a Scout if he'd had the opportunity,
because he also liked to trek off into the wilderness.
He found it necessary to find a deserted place from time to time,
away from the pressures of his daily life where he could be alone and pray,
as we heard last week in Hank's excellent sermon.

In this week's reading, like a Scoutmaster leading the way,
*Jesus took with him Peter and James and John,
and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.*

It seems here that Jesus is teaching his disciples — by modeling for them —
the importance of taking time to recharge their batteries,
or in this case to reignite the spirit, and to refresh the vision,
so they can continue in the ministry to which Jesus has called them.

Another lesson the disciples are to learn on this trek up into the mountains
has to do with the **necessity of listening**.

One of the more common ways for a student in school to get into trouble with the teacher
is by talking when he or she is supposed to be listening.

And Peter — bless his little exuberant heart — gets a **divine reprimand**
for running his mouth when he has no business doing so.

Peter, James, and John, up on this mountain,
find themselves in the midst of a **brehtaking** experience,
with Jesus suddenly transfigured before them,
his clothes dazzling white,
and with the mysterious appearance of Moses and Elijah
who are talking with Jesus.

The best advice one can follow in a breathtaking moment of inspiration
is probably just that — to take a breath...and then to take another breath...
inhale and exhale, then inhale and exhale again,
take your breath, be still, and stay in the moment.

But Peter does what so many of us do
when the gravity or surprise or beauty of a moment
fills us with emotion:
he takes a breath in order to speak,
or rather, to babel,
given that his suggestion turns out to be a real head-shaker:
*Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here;
let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.*
Apparently, like many of us,
when nervous,
Peter's go-to coping mechanism is to run his mouth.

I had a conversation recently with someone
who was admitting to me that she has Peter's problem
of talking too much.
She shared with me a little acronym she uses
to remind herself not to ramble on like Peter:
WAIT — W. A. I. T. — which stands for "Why Am I Talking?"
It's not a bad little reminder. Not a bad question.
Why. Am. I. Talking?

We all have reasons for the words we say:

Some of us are verbal processors.
Verbal processors figure out what they think by speaking their thoughts out loud.
The difficulty with this, of course,
is that you might say some things in the process that you don't mean,
or that are ill-advised,
until you figure out just what it is you do mean.

Others of us speak out of nervousness or anxiety
because silence makes us uncomfortable,
and we are trying either to save ourselves or save someone else
from what feels to us like an awkward silence...
...as if a pause in the constant buzzing of vocal chords
is going to kill someone.

Still others of us may just like the sound of our own voice,
or are so enamored with our own thoughts
that we are convinced the world would be a better place
if all these thoughts were expressed aloud
so that others have the benefit of thinking them, too.

[I do realize the irony of a preacher pointing this out!!!]

Others seek the affirmation of others to feel like a human being worthy of love,
and speaking is the way they draw attention to themselves
in order to get this affirmation.

For some, this need to be heard and noticed
shows no regard for whether the attention they get is positive or negative.
They just need to be acknowledged as present and powerful,
and even the power to get a negative reaction by what they say
will give them the attention they need
to know they are still alive.

Asking the question, "Why Am I Talking" is surely a very good spiritual practice.
Because it may just be the case, more often than not,
that our words are meeting our own needs,
much more than the needs of those around us.
Sometimes that may be necessary, and even good.

Still, we all might do well to heed the wisdom of Ecclesiastes:
*Never be rash with your mouth,
nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God,
for God is in heaven, and you upon earth;
therefore let your words be few.*

Peter, however, like so many of us, had not yet learned this lesson.
He had not learned the art of listening.
So he babbled on.

But God does have a way of getting our attention sooner or later.
And God silences Peter with a display of power and presence
that overshadows the mountain,
as God was famous for doing back in the days of Moses and Elijah.

And God speaks into the silence, saying
"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"
If you and I can but manage to keep silent for long enough to learn the art of listening,
God will speak to us, too.

Now, at first, this advice to listen to Jesus may be a tad frustrating.
On the one hand, we know it means to listen to Jesus
by listening to the words he says, and to the stories about him,
in the scriptures.

But on the other hand,
this command surely also means listening to Jesus
in our everyday lives,
in every moment of our days and nights.

Not just, “listen to Jesus” when you are reading or hearing scripture, but...
when you first rise in the morning, listen to him,
and when you are on your way to work or school, listen to him,
and when you are in the midst of making the myriad choices
that are presented to you every day, listen to him,
and when you find yourself in an unpleasant situation, listen to him,
and when you face a challenge, listen to him,
and when you are bored, listen to him,
and when you are afraid, listen to him,
and when you are angry, listen to him,
and when you are grieved, listen to him,
and when someone is telling you something you don't want to hear, listen to him,
and when someone is telling you something you do want to hear, listen to him.

What's frustrating about this admonition
is that Jesus doesn't often speak in an audible voice in these moments.

In our Tuesday morning study of Proverbs,
there is a similarly frustrating bit of advice given:
*The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
and whatever else you get, get insight.*

Or as it says in the King James,
*Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom:
and with all thy getting get understanding.*

The challenge with this repeated advice
is that it doesn't tell you exactly what to do in a given situation.
“Get Wisdom,” and “Listen to Jesus”
still leave the listening and the choosing up to you.

What these imperatives do do, however,
is to urge us to slow down, stop talking, and believe
that in every situation Jesus is offering you guidance,
if you will but listen and consider what that guidance may be.
In every case,
there is a wise choice and a foolish choice,
or perhaps a range of choices on the spectrum of wise and foolish,
and our choosing matters.

The voice that speaks to us from the cloud
admonishes us to be quiet long enough to listen and discern.

One of the interesting things about this story of the Transfiguration,
is that it is about both seeing and hearing, looking and listening.

Peter, James, and John are enamored
with the dazzling appearance of the three holy men standing before them.
And the same is true of us,
that we are easily distracted by both shiny objects.
We are also easily distracted by the constant bombardment of noise
both audible and visible noise,
that comes at us day and night.

A couple of weeks ago I spoke about our screen addictions,
and how internet marketers and propagandists of all varieties
use that addiction to lure us into choices they want us to make.

It may be that the art of listening to Jesus
begins with finding a way to filter out some of the noise that is coming at us.
Like Jesus taking Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain apart, by themselves,
so we may need to find creative ways to come away and listen.

Speaking of filters, last week I learned that I can apply a color filter to my smart phone.
So I have switched it to **grayscale**. No color on my digital screen.
It is much less enticing to look at all the time.
It's a small change, but perhaps a way to detach from my screens,
and pay more attention to the beauty of the actual world around me.

If having an impairment of one of the senses, or a complete loss of one of the senses,
sharpen the other senses,
perhaps an over reliance on one of the senses dulls the other.
I wonder what our visual culture does to our ability to listen?

There is another practice for Christians,
this one more ancient than the color filter on a smart phone.

It is called the Daily Examen,
in which you sit still for a period of time (maybe 20 minutes, maybe even just 5)
and take a mental stroll through the past 24 hours,
asking God to show you what God wants you to see,
and to say to you what God wants you to hear,
about the events and the people and the places of your day.

It is a way of listening to God, listening to Jesus, after the fact.
A sort of "better late than never" approach.
And often, I find, that there is still time, upon reflection, to amend my ways,
if I have been a babbling fool, or too hasty,
in the choices I have made.

So I invite you to learn to ask the question, and to ask it often:
W.A.I.T. - Why am I talking?
And then to heed the voice from the cloud:
This is my Son. The Beloved. Listen to him.
Listen...to...him...