

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 9:28-36

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with hi, Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,” not realizing what he was saying. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from, the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶ When 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.

The Transfiguration is one of the most ideal mountain-top experiences that we read in scripture. It gives us a glimpse of divine glory, we hear a word from, God, and it was an experience that changed all who are present.

The story of the Transfiguration is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as well as in 2 Peter 1:16–18. The Greek Orthodox tradition calls it the Metamorphosis due to the Greek word for “transfigured” in Matthew and Mark (metamorphōthē). In the Gospels, the story always appears after Jesus’ first prediction of his death, as the focus of ministry shifts toward Jerusalem.

Luke’s telling of the transfiguration includes a few details not included in Matthew and Mark. Luke tells us that this event happened eight days after Jesus predicted his death; while the others say it occurred six days later. Luke gives the reasoning that they went to the mountaintop to pray, and it was while Jesus was praying that the transfiguration occurred. Matthew and Mark say they went to the mountaintop to be alone. Luke also includes what Moses, Elijah and Jesus were discussing, which was about “his exodus,” meaning Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, that he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.”

Finally, Luke tells us more about the disciples’ experience as this all took place. We hear that they were sleepy, they saw Jesus’ glory, and they became terrified after Moses and Elijah left; and Jesus along with his disciples were covered by a cloud.

As we turn to look at the context for this story, we find that Luke 9 begins with Jesus sending out the twelve disciples with the power and authority to cast out demons, heal the sick, and proclaim, the kingdom, of God. We then read that Herod says he beheaded John the Baptist, which we can read more about in the gospel of Mark 6. The feeding of the five thousand takes place, Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah, and finally, before the story of the transfiguration, Jesus predicts his death for the first time.

The disciples watched as the Jesus story continued to unfold right before their very eyes, and now it seemed to take a dramatic turn, enlightening them, to the truth of Jesus’ ultimate mission. Certainly, at least eventually, as they looked back on their time with Jesus after his death, resurrection, and ascension, the drama of Jesus’ life added to the power and their drivenness for their own ministry to continue what Jesus began.

As the transfiguration story unfolds, we know that Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the top of the mountain to show them who he really was. We might wonder why Moses and Elijah were the ones who were present with Jesus. The answer is that Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the Prophets, which at the time represented two cornerstones of Israel's scripture (Luke 16:16, 29; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23–24; see also Luke 24:44).

The presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration clearly affirms Jesus' ministry as in harmony with their legacies and fulfilling the purpose they shared. The third cornerstone that was awaited was the Messiah. Jesus' presence with Moses and Elijah is then the third cornerstone, the one who would fulfill both the Law and the Prophets. In Matthew 5:17, we read Jesus' own words making this claim. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

All of this information is interesting as we try to understand this text. Putting ourselves in the sandals of the disciples gives us a better appreciation about how they experienced the Transfiguration; and how it influenced them for their ministry yet to come. Likewise, there are several lessons we can take from this story. Over the course of my thirty-four years in ministry, I have preached on several themes and lessons.

We could focus on the fact that Jesus took his three disciples to a mountaintop where they experienced this grand and holy event; and reflect on our own spiritual mountain-top experiences. We could remember what we felt, what we learned, how our experience shaped our faith and, perhaps, if applicable, question the reasons for our valley experiences. We could seek out answers for what we can do to get through and out of the discouraging valleys.

Another focus might be on Jesus' transformation, in particular the light that radiated from his appearance. We could explore the light we are to be shining the way for others to see Jesus.

The presence of Moses and Elijah stirs us to think about our mentors of the faith. People have come and gone in our lives who have influenced us, encouraged, and inspired us for our faith journeys. As we reflect on God's blessing on his Son, which we heard before at Jesus' baptism, we could delight in the message that we are also God's beloved children. All of these are excellent lessons for us to take from the story of the Transfiguration; and I know I have preached on all of them.

Today, however, I want to invite you to explore with me the blessing God offers at this experience. As I already mentioned, we heard a similar blessing God gives Jesus for all to hear at Jesus' baptism. It was there that the heavenly voice was heard to say, "this is my Son with whom, I am well pleased." This time the blessing that was heard was, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" The blessing that is heard affirms Jesus, the one chosen for God's divine purpose. But there is an addition to God's blessing. God clearly goes on to speak to the disciples, including future disciples like you and me. God said, "Listen to him!"

Listen to Jesus. What does that mean for us? Does the command mean we are merely to listen with our ears or, in our case, read the words of Jesus. Or could there be more to what this means? It in fact does mean more. In the Bible, the word "listen" implies both trust and obedience.

Jesus not only speaks to us through the words we read in scripture. He might also be speaking to us through our inner spiritual stirrings. When we feel restless, unsettled about something; could he be trying to guide us in the right direction as we face challenges, or could he be calling us to a particular task. When we are stricken with emotional pain, Jesus could be trying to reach us with assurance or comfort. We might have an unbelievable and unexplainable

experience with Jesus that we fear sharing because people might think we are gullible and crazy. Could Jesus be telling us that he knows that we are not crazy? Yes, to all of these.

These things happen. Jesus speaks to us, maybe not audibly, but spiritually or through experiences and emotional responses; and God says, “Listen to Jesus!”

Listening, however, also means watching how Jesus lived and seeking to apply what we observe and learn from Jesus to the circumstances of our lives and our relationships with other people. In other words, God’s command to listen to Jesus is a call to obedience.

As we read Jesus’ words and through these words observe the way he lived, and as we stop to spend time with Jesus reflecting on his words and actions, and intentionally take time to pray, we cannot help but grow in our knowledge of and in our relationship with Jesus. His voice will become recognizable and louder than the misguiding voices of the broken separated from God world. God tells us to, “Listen to Jesus.”

At railroad crossings the world over, there’s a distinctive x-shaped sign that alerts motorists that a train could show up at any minute. The form of this sign is a saltire, or Saint Andrew’s cross. It bears three words: “Stop, Look, Listen.”

In urban areas, railroad tracks are usually laid out in such a way that they don’t cross the roadway at all. The tracks either go over the road on a trestle, or under it through a tunnel. No warning sign is needed.

But sometimes the tracks simply must cross the road. Because a train has vastly greater mass than even the largest motor vehicle, it can’t make a sudden stop. As soon as the engineer applies the brakes, it can take thousands of yards before the train comes to a halt. For that reason, avoiding a fatal collision is the responsibility of whoever’s driving the truck or automobile.

Whenever possible, railroad crossings are equipped with automatic gates that make it physically difficult for drivers to cross the tracks when a train is closing in. Flashing red lights provide another level of warning.

But at many rural railroad crossings, there are neither automatic gates nor flashing red lights. The “Stop, Look, Listen” sign is the only piece of safety equipment. Rural drivers learn to approach railroad crossings with caution, heeding the three-word warning. They stop their vehicle at the edge of the tracks. They look down the tracks to the right and to the left. And they listen for the howl of the train’s horn. If all three of those safety tests prove negative, they carefully proceed over the tracks.

“Stop, Look, Listen” is a warning Jesus’ disciples largely failed to heed during the miracle of the transfiguration. First, they should have stopped rather than bustling around trying to build shelters for the three glowing figures. Second, they should have looked, fully soaking in the wondrous spiritual sign they were granted to experience. Third, they should have listened to the command spoken from the heavens: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

When it comes to spiritual life, few people — absorbed in the dailyness of life — bother to stop for any reason. Fewer still actively look for signs of God’s presence in the world. Only a small number of us who do stop and look are willing to truly listen to what Jesus is saying.

This message is an excellent lead into Lent which begins with Ash Wednesday this week. As we journey through Lent perhaps each of us can try to be more disciplined to stop, look and listen to Jesus. We might be surprised, and most certainly encouraged by what we hear. Amen.