

## **Listen to Him!**

Matthew 17:1-9

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Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

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I've always had a love of mountains.  
I find them awe-inspiring.  
They help me set my life in context.

A number of years ago on my way to a mission trip, I flew over Tanzania, which is the home of Mount Kilimanjaro. The pilot told us to look out our window to the left. As I looked down at the majestic sight of a 19,000-foot snow-covered peak that

towered over the clouds, the words of the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm held new meaning: “the heavens are telling of the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”

On one of my trips out west – to Utah – I remember heading out early in the morning to go on a run. My plan was to run three miles out into the canyon and then turn around and come back. When I reached the halfway point, I stopped, and was completely overwhelmed by the landscape around me. During my run, the sun had painted the canyon walls like fire. Massive rock faces and isolated mountains tore up out of the ground. The beauty of it was almost unsettling. So much so, that – frankly – I ran back home at a faster pace because a feeling of panic settled over me as I became aware of just how insignificant and alone I felt in that moment.

But my favorite mountains are the ones we get to enjoy right here in the Great North State. I love the Appalachian Mountains. I love the way they look and feel and smell. I love knowing how ancient they are – their paths and their peaks worn down by time and the millions of people who have enjoyed their beauty. When I hike in the Appalachians, sometimes I just like to put my palm against the rock – at Grandfather Mountain near Boone, or Lookout Mountain in Montreat – and think about the eons of history that those rocks have seen.

Not to get all “new age-y” on you, but my experience of the mountains borders on the sacred. With altitude, I find that I am more in touch with my spiritual self.

And yet most of my life is lived in what a friend of mine named Gary Charles has called “the flatlands.” The flatlands are where I work, raise my family, make decisions, invest in my community, and play.

In our scripture for this morning, Jesus leads Peter, James, and John from the flatlands and up a high mountain. There, they encounter the presence of God.

Matthew’s gospel is actually full of mountains. You can chart the course of the way Matthew tells Jesus’ story by scanning the horizon for the next peak.

Just after his baptism, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and tempted by Satan on the top of a mountain.

As he begins his public ministry, Jesus, his disciples, and the crowds that surround them make their ascent to hear the Sermon on the Mount.

After he makes his way into Jerusalem to initiate the conflict that ends up getting him crucified, Jesus withdraws from the city to be with his followers and give them instruction on the Mount of Olives.

Following his resurrection, at the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus makes his final appearance to the eleven disciples on the top of a mountain where we hear the Great Commission.

Right in the middle of Matthew's mountain range comes today's story, known as the Transfiguration. This story happens at the center of Jesus' ministry, when Jesus is as far away from his baptism as he is from his crucifixion. By this time in the story Peter, James, John and the rest of the disciples are beginning to get a sense of just how special this man that they are following really is.

What they experience on the Mount of Transfiguration is strange and surreal. Jesus changes in his appearance. He shines brightly – the fully divine part of who Jesus is becomes visible. He is joined by two of Israel's greatest prophets – Moses and Elijah. There is a bright cloud on top of the mountain – reminiscent of the cloud that covered Mount Sinai when Moses received the 10 Commandments. God speaks.

Frankly, it's hard to know what to make out of this mystical mountaintop experience. This is this kind of story (and others like it) that tends to befuddle us because it describes something that doesn't sit well within our logical, reasonable categories of what we consider to be possible.

One of our nation's founding fathers, when faced with this problem, did what I think many of us are tempted to do – only he had the gumption to publish his thoughts. Thomas Jefferson edited the Bible – leaving behind only those things in scripture that met the standard of what he considered to be rational. The Jefferson Bible is full of history and dialogue and stories about Jesus teaching his followers.

But miracles, resurrection, and mountaintop experiences like the Transfiguration are not included.

And yet, how, I wonder, is a Bible – that is only filled with the things we deem possible – ever going to have the power to call us beyond this world and into God's kingdom? How will a Bible only filled with things we agree with ever going to challenge us to grow as disciples? How will a Bible we have domesticated ever create in us a reverence for God's holy and uncontrollable power?

On the mountain of Transfiguration a number of things become clear. It is clear that Jesus is the Son of God. Not just a teacher, or a good man, or a prophet. Jesus is all of those things, but more. You don't get more esteemed company than Moses or Elijah – and it is in their company that God's voice echoes – this is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.

And then God says, "Listen to him!" The word "listen" is the same as the word for "obey." It is not enough to simply hear what Jesus says. God is clear that we are to obey what Jesus says.

Obedience is all well and good on top of the mountain with prophets and messiahs and God's voice booming from the clouds, but how about on the flatlands? Jesus says a lot: about forgiveness, and seeking justice, and faithfulness, and loving our

enemies, and not loving money, and taking up our cross, and losing our life. Why is it that we have a hard time listening?

That's the question raised by our scripture I have been pondering this week – what makes it hard to listen and to obey what Jesus tells us? Three reasons come to mind.

First, I think we have the tendency to do what Thomas Jefferson did. We are selective in the ways we listen. We edit out the things we don't want to hear. I think that most all of us recognize the authority that Jesus has in our lives and in our world. Yet we cannot help but to hear Jesus' words with bias. The many things that define who we are and what we think influence the things we will and will not hear Jesus say.

The most obvious example I can think of to illustrate this are the people who take Jesus' words very seriously when it comes to addressing social ills such as poverty and injustice and inclusion, but think very little about Jesus words about personal sin and personal responsibility. The opposite is equally true – I know many people who are passionately obedient to Jesus' words when it comes to the self and issues of personal morality, but who rarely dwell on what Jesus has to say about things we might deem political. The fact is, there is no part of our life that Jesus does not address: personal or political. When we choose to obey one part of Jesus' message over another, we end up with a gospel too small.

A second reason I think we have a hard time following God's instruction to listen to Jesus is because we have legitimate and understandable differences in interpreting what it was that Jesus meant about some of the things he said. When Jesus told the rich young ruler to give away everything he had and come follow – did he mean for us to take him literally? And what, exactly, does Jesus mean by the parable of the laborers in the vineyard? Who are “the first who will be last” and the “last who will be first?”

Even people who live together as a part of a covenant community – who commit to study Jesus' words together and shape their lives accordingly – for instance, those who are members of this church – even those who take Jesus' words seriously sometimes have a hard time listening...not because of a lack of faithfulness, but because interpretation is not always as clear as we would hope.

Finally, I think we have a hard time listening and obeying Jesus' words because we are afraid. We are afraid of not being up to the task. We are afraid of what it will mean for our carefully constructed lives if we start taking Jesus' words seriously. We are afraid of the conflict it will cause with our friends and our family. We are afraid of giving ourselves over fully to the promise that accompanies the good news of the gospel – but one that comes with a cost.

This – I think – is the most common response in the face of our call to obedience: fear. When the disciples heard God's command for them to listen to Jesus did you

notice what they did? They fell to the ground because they were overwhelmed with fear.

And did you notice what Jesus did?

He came, and he touched them, and he said: "get up, do not be afraid."

And a little while later – on a mountaintop, Jesus said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

For the one who stands, dazzling white, majestic, holy, and beyond the limits of our comprehension on the mountaintop is the same one who spent his time on the flatlands giving his life away for our sake –

So that when the powers of this world nailed his body to a cross on the top of a hill outside Jerusalem –

We might finally know that the God up there is active down here;  
And the experience up there is available down here;  
And the promises we hear up there are just as valid  
down here;

And instead of only relying on ourselves, there is strength for  
our journey if we would listen...