

Last Sunday after the Epiphany
Matthew 17:1-9
The Reverend Bonnie Underwood

Listening To Jesus

We're about to make that turn from this season of Epiphany, a time of witnessing the manifestations of Jesus as the Messiah, towards that more solemn season of Lent. But before we get to Ash Wednesday, we always pause to reflect on the Transfiguration. Each year, on this Last Sunday after the Epiphany, we read one of the synoptic gospel accounts of the mountaintop transformation of Jesus, as witnessed by Peter, James and John.

Matthew's lesson begins with the words, *six days later*. Six days since what? Jesus had begun to tell his disciples about what lies ahead — that he will go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and then be killed before being raised again on the third day.

The disciples have struggled to understand this teaching. They've struggled to understand what it means to take up their cross and follow Jesus.

Peter couldn't accept Jesus' vision of the future and he took Jesus aside to correct him, telling him that this must never happen. You may recall that Jesus' rebuke was fierce, "Get behind me Satan!" for Peter had become a stumbling block, setting his sights on things human, not divine, and encouraging Jesus to turn away from God's path of forgiving death and final resurrection.

So here we are, six days later, and Jesus is leading Peter, James, and John up a mountain where they witness God's own glory in that radiant light shining from Jesus' face and his dazzling white clothing. They see Jesus standing and talking with Moses and Elijah, the two leading figures of the Old Covenant, symbolic of both the Law and the Prophets.

What a blessing to have been there, witnessing this event, after the dread, fear, and worry about the next steps of Jesus' ministry! What a gift to have been given. Peter reacts immediately — he wants to do something — to take action now on this very spot, and stay here awhile, on the mountain, far away from the difficult path to Jerusalem.

But then God's voice is heard, repeating what was first said at Jesus' Baptism, "This is my beloved son, with whom I'm well pleased. Listen to Him."

Listen. We're not meant to stay on the mountaintop. We're meant to follow Jesus. We're meant to head back into the valley, and be among God's people, carrying our own cross. God tells us to listen, to open ourselves to being transformed by the divine light and step away from our own self-oriented human natures by loving others as ourselves.

How do we listen?

We start by opening ourselves to God through prayer and reading the Word. If you don't yet have a daily practice, consider using this upcoming season of Lent to start a discipline of daily prayer, scripture reading, and reflection. You can use the Daily Office in our Book of Common Prayer or a daily devotional like *Forward Day-by-Day*, to help adapt to spending time each day with God. And for those who are more technologically savvy, there are apps, like *Mission St.*

Clare that can make this practice particularly easy. You might also consider adding a new Lenten spiritual practice, like praying the Stations of the Cross, which we will do weekly in this space on Wednesdays at noon, beginning the 8th. And know that both Fr. Keith and I would be happy to talk to you to help find ways to incorporate prayer into your daily lives.

How else do we listen to God?

We listening to God by listening to others. Our Christian Education time here at Holy Spirit can be a time for us to deepen our understanding of God's Word and learn how to use a scriptural lens to help us navigate through confusing and conflicting issues that we can face everyday. Each Sunday Father Keith leads our Faith in Public Life series and soon we will also begin our Lenten Wednesday night programs. These are great opportunities to listen to one another and discern the nudging of the Spirit in our lives as we learn together how to carry Christ's light into the world.

But we also need to insure we're listen to those outside our community, those who may be different than us, or whose circumstances are different from our own — stretching our definitions of neighbor and community beyond those we know towards the stranger and the other, those outside of our immediate circle, for these too are beloved by God. This is a time of fear and uncertainty for many, because of differences of race, religion, sexuality, or immigration status.

This week I attended a clergy training day, led by Dr. Catherine Meeks, the lay leader of the Beloved Community, our Diocesan commission for Dismantling Racism. Over the years I've attended many diversity and anti-racism workshops as part of various leadership training, as I'm sure many of you have, but I was really looking forward to this training, as one of the realities we face today is that the racism of the past does continue to shape our present, and there is still much work to do as we live into our Christian commitments to strive for justice and peace among all God's people.

We spent time listening to one another's stories, watching portions of different videos, reading excerpts from books, and then discussing what we heard from our various perspectives. We purposefully worked together to create a brave space, where we could compassionately share truths on tough topics, and we came to recognize that whites are subject to unconscious and implicit biases and people of color may experience an unending internalized weight and burden, due to ongoing cultural pressures and realities.

Together, we recognized that there are still systems and structures within our society that reinforce inequality and injustice. And as we listened to one another, we also discovered what we have in common: that we are all wounded people, with a profound need for God's healing presence and we all share in a desire to be shown God's way to move forward and do God's work in the world.

We're all called to listen. For listening, as a community of faith, is the way to both grow together and open ourselves to being led by the Spirit as we discern how we live into our Christian call to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Within this faith community, we will continue to find new ways to create those brave spaces to share compassionate truth telling. You can expect to hear more about new book studies and chances for us to watch films together, that can open us to transformational change in Christ, by hearing more clearly the voices of our brothers and sisters.

We're not meant to stay on the mountaintop. We're meant to follow Jesus, to walk with him on the road to Jerusalem. This requires listening. It means opening our hearts and minds to the truth of God's love for all humankind, and God's deep desire for us to live lives of Christian service, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Be intentional during this upcoming Lenten season. Spend time listening to Jesus: listening through prayer and studying the Word, listening to one another, and listening to the diverse voices of our neighbors. Holy Listening will help us begin to see one other through the eyes of Christ. For Jesus shows us the power of God's love made manifest, the power of nurturing and healing and bringing new life to the world through mercy and compassion.

Listening is part of our transformational faith, opening our hearts to the Spirit who guides us as we pick up our cross to follow Jesus. Amen.