

LISTEN TO HIM!
Transfiguration Sunday
March 3, 2019

I have developed a routine each week when it comes to worship planning and sermon preparation. On Monday I will take a look at the lectionary Scriptures for the coming Sunday. I will read over them and pray about them and see what would be the best focus for the services. I will also try to choose the liturgy and the hymns. And I will put together a liturgy for the 11:10 service so that the Beracah Choir can have it to work on for rehearsal on Monday nights and so I can get Steve's input if I am struggling with choosing songs for the liturgy.

Then on Tuesday, I will read over some different commentaries on the Scriptures, jot down some notes or interesting ideas that I come across. If there is time I will also watch the video from the previous Sunday to help connect the two services. On Wednesday I will try not to read anything more about the Scriptures and simply ponder what I have read and where my thoughts (and hopefully God's leading) are taking me. Then on Thursday I will begin to write the sermon. Also I will read over the bulletin and make sure that I don't want to change any of the hymns or Scripture readings. And finally, I will try to come up with a sermon title so the bulletins can be printed.

Most weeks coming up with the sermon title is one of the biggest challenges. It is something that I almost always save until the last minute because I don't want to have to try to fit the title into the sermon after it is already written. I would rather have it reflect the content of the sermon than try to shoehorn it in so people don't look at it and wonder what in the world it had to do with the sermon that was actually preached.

But I wonder- does anyone actually pay attention to the sermon title? I know that some people do because when Worth was here, they would tell me that they knew who was preaching that Sunday because of the sermon title. Regardless of whether people

pay attention to them, I enjoy coming up with sermon titles. However this Sunday was one that was a real challenge. The story of Jesus' transfiguration is always a challenge in just about every aspect.

I had a pretty good idea for the sermon title earlier in the week. I was going to call it "Changes" as a follow up to last week. Does anyone remember what last week's sermon title was? It was "Transformation". Anyway, I shared it with Rachel in the office and she said that she thought I had used that one before. Sure enough, two years ago when I preached on the Transfiguration, my sermon title was "Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes". So I had to come up with another one for this Sunday.

That is the big challenge of the Transfiguration. It is hard to find something new to say about it. And it comes up in the lectionary every year on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. No matter if it is from Matthew, Mark, or Luke (as this year is) the story is pretty much the same.

Jesus takes his three closest disciples (Peter, James, and John), his inner circle, up to the top of a high mountain. While they are there, Jesus is "transfigured" before them. Matthew and Mark actually use the word "transfigured" in their accounts of this happening, while Luke says that Jesus' appearance "changed" which is the literal definition of "transfigured". It means "a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state." This is what happened to Jesus.

While he was there on the mountain, his appearance changed. He looked different and his clothes became dazzling white. And then Moses and Elijah appeared, talking with Jesus. Peter suggests that, since it is so good to be there on the mountain with Jesus and Moses and Elijah, they should build dwellings for each one of them. This was likely the only way he knew to respond to such a confusing and unprecedented occurrence. He didn't know what else to say but knew that he wanted to say something.

But even as he was speaking these words, a cloud came down on them and overshadowed them. A voice from out of the cloud says: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Suddenly Moses and Elijah were gone and Jesus was there alone. As they head back down the mountain, they decide (or are told by Jesus) to not say anything to anyone about what they had experienced.

Those are the basics of the Transfiguration. The Gospels have a few variations among their accounts, most significantly found in what the voice from the cloud actually says. In Matthew the voice says “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” In Mark it is “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” And as we read from Luke, the voice says “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Despite the subtle differences, all of these are a callback to the voice that spoke from heaven when Jesus was baptized.

The words spoken in Matthew’s account of the transfiguration are exactly the same as the words spoken in his account of Jesus’s baptism, with the addition of “listen to him!” at the end. In Mark and Luke, the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism was spoken directly to Jesus. “YOU are my Son...” While at the Transfiguration, in all three versions, the voice is directed to the disciples. To Peter, James, and John, and even to us. “This is my Son.... Listen to him!”

Interestingly, Luke’s account of the Transfiguration is the one with the most details. Luke is the only one to tell us that Jesus and Moses and Elijah were discussing the details of Jesus’ departure, about what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem. Luke is the only one who mentions that the disciples were “weighed down with sleep.” Which opens the possibility that the whole thing might have been a dream, but I don’t believe that it was.

As strange as it is, as unusual and inexplicable as it is, I believe that the Transfiguration happened just as it is recorded in the Gospels. For it is an important point in Jesus' life and in his ministry. It is important for Peter, James, and John as it ultimately furthers their understanding of who Jesus is and what all of the events that will soon take place will mean. I want to spend a few minutes taking a closer look at how the Transfiguration was important for Jesus, for his disciples, and for us.

The Transfiguration is the turning point in Jesus' ministry. From its beginning with his baptism and temptation up to the events on the mountaintop that we are focusing on today, most of Jesus' ministry has been centered in Galilee. He went around the villages of his home region teaching and preaching and healing. After he was transfigured, even though he continued to preach and teach and heal, Jesus' focus began to shift more to what was awaiting him in Jerusalem, to the events of his arrest, crucifixion, death and resurrection. Just a few verses later in Luke's gospel, we read that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." His transfiguration was the confirmation of his identity and his calling that he needed to go to Jerusalem.

Seeing Jesus transformed in appearance was what revealed his glory to his closest followers. It showed them that he was not just another teacher, preacher, and healer, but that he was something more. The presence of Moses and Elijah confirm that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises and the covenant of the Old Testament; with Moses being representative of the Law and Elijah representing the Prophets. They were symbolic of the previous ways that God spoke to his people. Jesus was, and is, the new way.

At the Transfiguration, Jesus's disciples heard his Father claim him as the Beloved, as the Chosen one. Unlike the voice of heaven at Jesus' baptism, where it could be argued that it was only spoken for Jesus' benefit, the voice of heaven at the

Transfiguration is clearly identifying Jesus to others. There can be no doubt for Peter, James, and John about who it is they are following.

Just before all of this happens, Jesus asks the disciples about the perceptions and understandings of his identity. “Who do the people say that I am?” and they answer him with what they have been hearing, that the people believe Jesus to be the return of John the Baptist (who had been beheaded) or Elijah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus asks them who they say that he is; Peter answers that he is “The Messiah of God.”

The voice from heaven at the Transfiguration confirms what Peter proclaimed; that Jesus is the Beloved and Chosen Son of God. He is the one who will bring salvation to his people. This would definitely have changed everything for his disciples. It would have been confirmation of what they had been waiting for and hoping for and searching and seeking. Finally the Messiah has come and he had chosen them to be his disciples, to help spread his message.

The importance of the Transfiguration for Jesus was how it served as a turning point in his life and ministry, a confirmation of his identity and calling; for his disciples it was important because it confirmed their suspicions about who Jesus was. But it’s importance for us is not quite as straightforward.

For Jesus and the disciples, they were living through it. The story of Jesus life, and the salvation he would bring as the Messiah was unfolding before them. They needed the revelations that were brought to light in the Transfiguration. But for us, we know the WHOLE story. We know from the beginning that Jesus is the Beloved Son of God, the Chosen One, the Messiah. We know that Jesus had to “set his face toward Jerusalem” and experience the rejection that will lead to his crucifixion, the death that will lead to his resurrection.

Knowing the whole story, it makes the events of Jesus' Transfiguration harder for us to see its relevance to us. We don't need to see him in his glory, we don't need to see Moses and Elijah, we don't need to hear the voice from heaven proclaiming that he is God's Son, God's Chosen. We don't need what the disciples needed or what Jesus needed from that experience.

But we do need to do the last thing that the voice from heaven says. For in all three accounts of the Transfiguration, despite their small differences, the one thing that the voice from heaven says about Jesus in all of them is "Listen to him!" And those three little words are, for us, the most important thing about the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Listen to him! If we truly believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, if we truly believe that Jesus is God's Son, if we truly accept him as our Savior, then we must listen to him. God was not only telling Peter and James and John to listen to his Son, but he is telling us as well. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, we must listen to him.

It is easy to say that we must listen to Jesus but it is much harder to actually do so. It seems like it should be as clear as the voice from heaven saying "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" But we don't have it, we don't hear it, that clearly. Yes we have the Bible which tells us what Jesus says, what we should listen to, but as I have said before, the Bible is written by dozens of different people, in an equal number of situations, over hundreds of years. It does not speak with one, singular voice.

Even the Gospels, the stories of Jesus' life and ministry, were written by four different people for different audiences, for different purposes. And they fail to speak with a singular, unified voice. Except for in one thing. There is one thing that we can

hear Jesus saying to us throughout all of the Gospels and throughout all of Scriptures and even through all of time. And that is to love; to love God and to love others.

The one constant word that Jesus speaks to us is love. And the one consistent commandment that he gives to us is to love. The first expectation that Jesus has of us is to be loving. When we hear God telling us to listen to his Son, the very first thing we must hear is the call to love.

On that mountain top, when Jesus was transfigured, when his glory was revealed, when he was made known as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, when God identified him as his Son, his Chosen, all those who were there and heard that voice from heaven speak, they were told to "Listen to Him!" And so are we. The importance of the Transfiguration for us is the command to listen to Jesus.

We must listen to Jesus when he tells us to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength. We must listen to Jesus when he tells us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We must listen to Jesus when he tells us to love one another, just as he has loved us we are also to love one another.

If we do nothing more than to love God, then we are listening to Jesus. If we all that we do is to love our neighbors, then we are listening to Jesus. If the actions of our lives are as loving towards each other as Jesus is loving towards us, then we are listening to Jesus. The voice from heaven is still speaking to us. God is still telling us that Jesus is his Son, his Chosen. Let us listen to him and let us love as he loves.

Amen.