

Today our gospel lesson in Mark finds us on the mountaintop with Jesus, Peter, James, John, Moses and Elijah in a very strange and maybe familiar story to some of you. Today is not only Valentine's Day but also Transfiguration Sunday. This particular story of Jesus' transfiguration is a small window into a much larger love story that defies explanation. It's a story that is "more evocative than something to be figured out" (Working Preacher podcast). Before we read God's Word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.** Mark 9:2-9.

Even in the strangeness and mystery of Jesus' transfiguration, I can't help myself, and I wonder what Peter, James and John were thinking that day on the mountain top?! We are told in Mark that six days later- six days after Jesus had shared his first passion prediction- six days after Jesus had rebuked Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33)- six days after Jesus had said to the crowd, including his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). Six days later- after these loaded and intense conversations, Jesus took these three disciples up a high mountain away from life's distractions...just them and Jesus. And there on that high mountain, Jesus was transfigured by God right before their very eyes- he was lit up in dazzling white, a sign of the lifting of the veil between heaven and earth- "a thin place" was exposed- you know- those places where we feel closer to God and God feels closer to us. Where has a thin place been for you? A place where you strongly experienced God's presence with you and felt really close to God? Some people might call it a mountain top experience- an experience that was a fleeting glimpse of the kingdom of heaven here on earth or where you felt you saw Jesus

briefly in his glory face-to-face?! Scripture reveals that Peter, James and John were terrified on that mountaintop. “They knew Jesus as a teacher, a storyteller, a healer and a traveling companion but here on this mountain, they witnessed Jesus becoming at once both fully himself and fully strange. The man they thought they knew was suddenly more, suddenly Other” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). The disciples had witnessed the deeds of Jesus but failed to grasp his full identity and mission as God’s Son. Due to what they saw, Peter, didn’t know what to say. He somehow finds some words and says how good it is to be there. It’s so good that Peter wants to make three permanent dwellings or shrines- one for Jesus, Moses and Elijah- all important figures of faith and all who have encountered God on a mountain. It is oh so tempting to remain...to linger where everything is dazzling and clear (Jan Richardson, *Dazzling*). Peter, James and John want to savor this moment and never let go of it before anything happens to Jesus! Faced with the possibility of suffering, Peter wants to freeze this moment when Jesus is filled with God’s glory as well as to hold onto Moses and Elijah. These “thin place” or mountain top experiences are essential to our faith. Perhaps these moments are made to strengthen us as we come down the mountain- to travel with us as we return to our everyday lives? Because as we all know, we must come down from the mountaintop. Just as Peter wants to settle into this glimpse of heaven, a cloud overshadows them and a voice from the cloud says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him” (9:7). We’ve heard this divine voice before from Mark’s Gospel when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Except then the voice from heaven speaks directly to Jesus saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (1:11). God interrupts Peter, James and John in this moment and for the first and only time in Mark’s Gospel, God

orders Jesus' disciples to listen to his Beloved Son. Listen to Jesus, who is not only the supreme teacher and prophet but God's Beloved Son: the Messiah, the Savior of God's people! After God speaks, the disciples look around and see no one with them anymore but Jesus. How strange and curious. Here on the mountaintop there's a miracle focused on sight- a visually stimulating experience- a fleeting glimpse of the glory of God and then God comes in the cloud, claims Jesus as his son and commands the disciples to listen to Jesus. They go from seeing to being told to listen to being told not to tell anyone what they had seen until after Jesus' resurrection. I told you this was a strange story.

Who we listen to and allow to shape our thinking, attitude, and worldview is crucially important. God says to listen to Jesus! What does God mean? I wonder if listen here means to be obedient?! Maybe listening to Jesus simply means trusting and following him wherever he leads...even to the cross?! Listening to Jesus can come through reading scripture, praying, or creating space in which to encounter God, in worship, through others, in music, in dreams, etc. Singer Michelle Williams sings a Nigerian gospel song called, "Say Yes." The chorus goes, "When Jesus say yes, nobody can say no. When Jesus say yes, nobody can say no" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MZxf-IQD-o>). My colleague and her family, which include her three young daughters, listen to this song often. One day her three year-old was upset that her dad told her no about eating candy. She looked up at him and said, "When Jesus say yes, we don't say no." Out of the very mouths of babes! Many of us have selective listening, don't we?! We listen to what is most convenient for us. To say the least, most of us have some room to grow in learning to listen well.

Igor Stravinsky, a famous conductor and songwriter said, 'To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.' If this is true of music, how much more does it bear on Jesus' commands? It is one thing to admire the Messiah; to obey him is something else" (C. Clifton Black, workingpreacher.org). Throughout scripture, we're offered many examples of Jesus' commands and teachings. "Follow me." "Feed my sheep." "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." "Make disciples." "Love one another." **How well are you listening to Jesus?** Listening is an act of faith.

The long headline drew me in. "A rowdy boy almost made her quit teaching. Then he became her son." In 2013 Chelsea Haley joined Teach for America right after graduating from college. She was 22. She signed up for two years to make a difference in a low-income school. As a follower of Christ, she felt lead to teach in a challenging area but didn't expect any grief from students. Chelsea was assigned to Baton Rouge, LA, where she taught Jerome, who was 12 at the time. Jerome was a teaching challenge, to say the least. Chelsea struggled to make a connection with him but eventually she began to earn his trust. Other teachers would send Jerome into Chelsea's classroom, where she made him finish his work. Jerome's home life wasn't great, as his mom struggled with losing her husband and a daughter. Jerome also had a much younger brother, Jace, who was one and a half. Jerome and Jace spent a lot of time with their grandparents but that was getting hard as well. Meanwhile Chelsea's commitment with Teach for America was concluding, but she felt like her work there wasn't done, and she stayed. One night, Chelsea felt as though God came to her in a dream, telling her she was destined to be Jerome's mother. She laughed out loud, thinking how

crazy that was, and went back to sleep. But the next day at school, Chelsea was overcome with a profound, peaceful feeling while Jerome sat alone with her taking a test. Chelsea went on to share that Jerome looked up and asked her if he could live with her one day. The next day Chelsea went to dinner with Jerome, Jace and their mother. Chelsea explained that she was finishing her third year teaching in Baton Rouge but was planning on moving back to GA. The boys' mother looked up at Chelsea and said, "You can go back, but I want you to take Jerome and Jace with you." Chelsea, who was 24 years old and single, pulled money out of her retirement plan for a down payment on a house, and she adopted Jerome and Jace. Some may have thought she was crazy, but she felt called by God to listen and obey. The law in GA is that you must be 12 years older than someone to obtain custody of them, and Chelsea is 12 years and 3 months older than Jerome. Life for this new family is out of the ordinary but really good. Where Jerome used to fail his classes, he is now an honor roll student and loves school. (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/07/health/iyw-teacher-adopts-son-trnd/index.html>).

How well are you listening to Jesus? When we listen to God through Jesus, our lives are transformed. It may not be something as big as adopting two children like Chelsea; nevertheless, you never know where or to whom or to what action Jesus is calling you! We may not light up in dazzling bleached white but Christ shines in our faces and in our lives causing others to experience Christ's love through us. These strange, rare and often short-lived mountaintop experiences don't just happen. In today's Gospel story and in our every day lives, God is constantly transforming us through God's power and love. If we aren't listening,

how will we know? Maybe we need to practice listening more? The great preacher Howard Thurman once said, “The true purpose of all spiritual disciplines is to clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us” (*Disciplines of the Spirit*). Maybe this Lent, which is the forty days we journey with Jesus to the cross that starts this coming Wednesday, we could listen to Jesus as a spiritual discipline? Lent is a time- leading up to Easter- of self-examination, self-discipline, and focus on the realities of human sin that made the cross inevitable as God’s loving response to our sin. Listening does not result in staying on the mountain “where the air is pure and the view is stunning. We’re invited to listen to the voice of God’s Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross” (Melinda Quivik, workingpreacher.org). Maybe we can begin by opening our hearts to what Jesus is asking of us...by opening our ears to where Jesus is leading us to follow...by opening our hands and feet to how Jesus is meeting others’ needs through us? Faith is the foundation for our listening hearts. **May we heed God’s command to listen so that when Jesus says yes, we can’t say no.** To God be the glory! Amen.