

Listen!
Transfiguration Sunday
February 15, 2015
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Texts: 2 Kings 2.1-12;
 Psalm 50.1-6;
 2 Corinthians 4.3-6;
 Mark 9.2-9

We are dwelling today in the realm of the mystical. We have before us not one but two visions rich with symbols that transport a prophet in the one story and three disciples in the other into mystic communion with God. What I mean by mystical is actually captured quite well by Miriam Webster's definition of the word: experience that has a "spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence" and places a person in a "direct subjective communion with God¹"

In both stories something very similar is happening. In the case of Elisha, he has been following the great prophet, Elijah, for some time. Elijah had already given him everything he needed to take up his ministry when he was gone. Elisha was ready except that he didn't feel ready. Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's ruah or spirit but what he discovered in that vision was that Elijah's spirit was surrounded by God's Spirit. The whirlwind in his vision was a known symbol for the Ruah, wind, Spirit of God. In the vision, when Elijah was taken up into heaven he was surrounded on every side by God's Spirit. The clarity, vision, and passion that Elisha was longing for was fueled in Elijah by the Spirit of God. And that Spirit had been present from the moment Elijah first saw Elisha in a field and took his mantle and placed it around his shoulders. All those days since as master imparted wisdom to disciple - all those conversations along the road - every test along the way - had been infused by the Spirit. What the mystical moment does for him is to finally apprehend what had escaped his notice before.

¹ Miriam Webster dictionary online: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mystical>

This vision in Mark, which we call the Transfiguration, does the very same thing for Jesus' disciples. The disciples are in a very similar place. Jesus has just told them what is coming for them in Jerusalem. They struggle to see how his talk of suffering and violence and death could have anything to do with the glory of God. They wonder if Jesus has gotten it wrong; whether they have gotten it wrong for following him. The vision that unfolds up on that mountain clarifies that everything Jesus had been telling them - everything that had happened up until that moment and would happen afterward - was surrounded by and infused with the Spirit of God.

Not many of us have experiences like this. As I make my way through life I am resigned that I am not one who is likely to have such visions...maybe you find yourself in that boat as well. I'm ok with that. As the gospel tells us today mystic visions are actually rather terrifying in the moment. My interest for us today as we come to the end of the season of Epiphany, the season of light, and stand on the edge of the season of Lent is to recover for ourselves an insight today that can make us available to the mystical even if we never have a vision like these ones before us today. There is a single word that captures that insight and it comes from the voice of God in Mark chapter 9 verse 7: "**Listen**" - "This is my Son, the Beloved; **listen** to him!"

The vision for Elisha and for the disciples essentially confirmed what God had already been telling each of them from that day when Elijah found Elisha in the fields or the day that Jesus called Peter, James, and John to come follow. God's Spirit, whether they could apprehend this or not, had been surrounding them. There was deep spiritual meaning infused into all of their conversations if only they would stop and listen.

I've been hearing the call to listen over a number of weeks of now. During Epiphany, at Hope Church, we celebrate a Season of Reconciliation. And one part of that season is hearing testimonies from our members about how God is working reconciliation in their life. On the very first week, Dede Johnston, shared in her testimony how she has been bringing students together for intentional dialog on difficult topics. She teaches them how to speak and especially how to listen. She watches as people who say thoughtless things sit side by side with people who carry hidden pain and how she looks around expecting the whole thing to unravel but

finds that after years of this work it never does because they begin to listen. Or last week, when Lee Marcus shared his testimony with the very same admonition to us – to learn how to listen – that he is finding in the fractious world of politics where he works – that careful listening is the way to build bridges.

Last weekend, I came through another session of teaching facilitators the practice of restorative circles. There is a fair bit to learn about how to lead a circle for people who are in conflict and want to find some space to connect and move forward. We start with the basic building block - the lynch pin of the whole process – and it is nothing more than training ourselves to listen - to bring a different attention to our listening than we often do. Ann McKnight does a wonderful job in these training of explaining the kind of listening we want to develop and she does it by describing the ways we typically listen. See if any of these sound familiar: when someone else is speaking you listen for how you are going to build the next piece of your argument or how the thing being shared connects to something you've experienced before or how you can fix what is wrong in the other person or simply assessing whether you agree or disagree with what is being said.

All of these ways of listening include comparing what we have heard with something we already know. The frame of reference for our listening is our own experience. The power of mystical visions is encountering God in a way that defies our past experience – brings something new to our awareness – something we never thought possible before – something we could never imagine. The disciples before the transfiguration could not fathom what Jesus was talking about. Nothing in their conceptual framework could prepare them for what he was revealing. At the end of the day, the mystical vision had a very simple message for them: LISTEN. Set aside all your assumption – all your past experience – and simply listen for what matters most in what Jesus is saying.

So on this Transfiguration Sunday, I am hearing a sharp and distinctive call upon us today that I wonder if you hear as well. Not a call to action but rather a simple but remarkably difficult call to listen. To listen in ways we are not prone to listen. To listen with an expectation that there is more for us to learn and see and experience than meets the eye. Think back to that

definition of the mystical: spiritual meaning that is not apparent to the senses or obvious to the intellect. I wonder what God might do with us – in us – through us if we walked through our days listening for the spiritual meaning infused into our daily life. To listen for what is most important, for what matters most to God not only when Scripture is read or prayers are offered or preachers speak – although those aren't bad places to listen for what matters most to God. But I'm talking about bringing this kind of deep listening for God's voice in ways that are not immediately apparent to your senses or obvious to your intellect when your children are squabbling or your office mate is ranting or a stranger approaches on the street or in the midst of a movie you are watching or at the bed of a loved who is dying or in the midst of a passionate embrace or a complicated discussion or alone shoveling snow or walking in the woods.

I don't anticipate many of us will have visions like Elisha or the disciples. I do however trust, because of God's Word to us and because of our shared life together, that God's Spirit is always moving and infusing all of life with profound opportunities for us to connect – to learn – to grow.

“This is my Beloved”, says God, – so “Listen!”