

Listen!
Transfiguration Sunday
February 26, 2017
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Exodus 24.12-18;
Psalm 99;
2 Peter 1.16-21;
Matthew 17.1-9

Yesterday morning I heard a snippet of the Ted Radio Hour when I was in and out of the car quickly. I have no idea who was speaking or much of any of the context of his comment but I was very taken by the small piece that I heard and where it connected with me as I've been wrestling with this text for today. He said something like..."human beings really love stories. We like a beginning, a middle, and end....but if we aren't careful the stories will carry us away. If we lose our humility - if think we think we know the ending - we may stop exploring and investigating and being curious." In other words (in my words), we stop listening because we think we already know.

We have before us today the account of what we call the Transfiguration. This mystical experience between Jesus and his closet friends is clearly a precious piece of memory for the early church which we'll look at in a moment more closely. Everything about this story evokes a feeling of mysticism from its location on the top of a remote mountain, to the voice, to the cloud, to the light. This was one of those rare mystical moments that do not come at all for some of us and do not come often for any of us. What I mean by mystical is a moment of overwhelming awe and fascination with the beauty and glory and power of God.

When I've preached on this text in the past I've named this moment as a glimpse of the end of the story. The life of Jesus as it was unfolding did not look like some triumphal revelation of God with us. He was not radiant with light as he wandered the Judean countryside. There was no running voice over as we hear in this text offering divine sanction for his teaching; his often unsettling, counter-intuitive teaching. Even if you knew who this

little boy born to Mary and Joseph really was there was still no way you could have predicted where his life would take him. Even Mary who presumably DID know was troubled at times by his ministry and questioned him along the way. Even this glimpse didn't make it any easier for Peter and James and John. They lost their fool heads up on that mountain. They see the radiant glory of God surrounding Jesus and what's their response? They want to create monuments! They were enthralled in the ways that we become enthralled by the promise of power and triumph. Now that they have a glimpse of the end of the story they begin to spin their plans to enshrine this power. The divine voice interrupts the spinning of this story that would carry them away with a reiteration of those beautiful words spoken over Jesus at his baptism. Beautiful words of blessing about Jesus as the Beloved of God that take a very different tone by the last phrase. Here's how I hear it: "would you just LISTEN to him!"

This is where I want to go back to trace again the precision with which this story has been preserved within the early church. The gospel writers take great freedom in their retelling of the gospel. There were clearly some sayings of Jesus and some stories of his life and ministry that were circulated and retold and passed down among the early believers. Eventually the gospel writers pulling from those saying and stories give us the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that we have today. They weave the stories and sayings together with what the Holy Spirit was revealing to them in their own time and place. They take great liberty in how they weave these pieces together: what they include, what they don't, even the order in which these events happen.

But not when it comes to the transfiguration. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell this story almost exactly the same way. This mystical experience is always preceded by the same piece of teaching and followed by the same story of healing. So if we are wondering where to begin when it comes to the exhortation to "Listen to him" that teaching that comes before and that healing that comes after are pretty good places to start.

On the way to the mystical mountaintop, Jesus speaks of suffering. He speaks of his own suffering and then he speaks about *our* suffering: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up

their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”¹ On the way down from the mountaintop Jesus encounters a man seeking healing for his son and the disciples - the ones who had not gone up to the mountain top - they were unable to help him. And Jesus, clearly frustrated, says to them: “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.”² And he heals the boy and gives him back to his father.

If you think that the end of the story is about a kind of glory that triumphs over enemies; the kind of power that needs to be enshrined in gold to instill awe and fear. If you what you are after is success and accolades and then these pieces about suffering and self-denial will fall on deaf ears. And the kind of compassion and prayer and presence required to walk with those who are tormented and suffering - the kind of healing that Jesus embodied and turns over us - we will not get it. It will seem a distraction from the business of triumph. We will not have the time. We will not have the stomach for it. And we will not know what to do.

So what if we took a step back and admit that we don't know how the story of our life with God in this time and this place is going to link up with the story of our life with God at a later time and a different place. What if we could just BE with what is....and then listen to Jesus. Really listen especially when he talks to us about suffering? What if we believed him about it? That suffering and loss isn't some big failure that signals our lack of faith but is in fact a place where we experience the power of God. That these places of pain can become a crucible of profound spiritual formation. That in fact our capacity to be a healing presence in the world is directly linked to the healing we experience from our own inevitable suffering. If we live such a privileged existence that we have never suffered, then we need all the more to walk closely with those who do.

Laurie Baron shared a poem with Gordon and with me a week or so ago when we were meeting to plan the Wednesday night Lent series. It was a poem that Gordon knew well but was new to me. And it opened this text

¹ Matthew 16.24-25, NRSV

² Matthew 17.17, NRSV

for me. It helped me to see why the early church needed to hold this mystical experience where God's glory was revealed together with this teaching about suffering and healing.

I want to share the poem by Naomi Shihab Nye entitled *Kindness*.³

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

³ Naomi Shihab Nye from *Words under the Words: Selected Poems*, 1995
<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/kindness>

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Friends, it is only when we let our suffering, our losses, our shameful defeats form us into people who are kind, and open, and willing to BE with others in their suffering and losses and defeats --- that is when the glory of God begins to radiate through us and into the world.

So thanks be to God for this strange and mysterious story that can help open our ears so that we listen!