

Today is Transfiguration Sunday; it marks the end of the season of Epiphany and ushers in Lent.

Matthew 17:1-9

1Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Our gospel text starts six days after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, and was then rebuked by Jesus for saying Jesus was wrong about the cross awaiting him. Peter had just gotten it exactly right when he confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” He said this in response to Jesus’ question, Who do you Say that I am? Right after that, Jesus speaks about the cross, which is coming, which causes Peter to get it all wrong in his response to Jesus. He couldn’t listen to Jesus speak of his own upcoming torturous execution by the Romans. In response, Peter declared, “Never. You can’t die; you are the Messiah.” Peter is so wrong. Jesus is the Messiah, but not the conquering military hero Peter wants.

Six days later, after Peter heard Jesus say those oh so painful words to him, “Get behind me, Satan,” Jesus still has faith in Peter, who remains the leader of the disciples and hasn’t lost his place in Jesus’ inner circle, as they go up a mountain together with James and John. Like Peter, even when we are all wrong, really wrong, Jesus does not let us go. If he did, none of us would be here. Jesus has something in store for his leadership team; he has something to show them. As they arrive on the mountain top, Jesus magnificently shines in glory. His clothes turn a brilliant white, showing no evidence of an arduous climb up this mountain. He is transformed before their very eyes.

For them, it is a mountaintop experience. They have a moment when everything is different, but in a very good way. They not only get a glimpse of Jesus’ humanity but also a peek at his divinity. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appear, speaking with Jesus. They were considered God’s two greatest prophets, Moses representing the law and Elijah representing the prophetic tradition. In scripture,

both encounter God on a mountain, and Jesus stands in that tradition, in continuity with the greatest of the Old Testament prophets who are speaking with Jesus.

Then Peter bursts out, “Great thing, we are here, we can build three tents.”

Now there are three different interpretations of Peter’s interjection, and I think they all present some insight into Peter and maybe ourselves.

The first interpretation is that it is just like Peter to blurt out an answer even if he doesn’t understand what is going on. He is the perfect example of “Don’t just stand there, do something, say something.” This fits with him blurting out “Never!” when Jesus tries to tell him what kind of death awaits him in Jerusalem. Peter is overwhelmed.

Maybe he is offering hospitality and welcome to these three divinely sent people. Then, as now, hospitality was an essential part of what it meant to be the people of God. So maybe Peter wants to offer rest and refreshment to the three giants of the faith. He offers leadership teams tents. “Here you can have our tents.”

The third way to look at this is that it was a mountain-top experience, when everything seemed so perfect and right and you don’t want things to end. As Jimmy Buffett sings about a perfect lunch, “I Wish Lunch Last Forever”. We all know those times when everything seems just perfect, and we wish it could stay that way. We also know it won’t last forever, no matter how hard we try. I think all three are at play. But especially this last one. In Peter’s heart, this is just a perfect experience. Peter sees Jesus in his glory, and he doesn’t want to let go. We know that feeling of a perfect day or moment that we don’t want to let go of and wish we could recreate, but we can’t. When we try, it’s just not the same.

Here is the Jesus that Peter wants in all his glory, but we know that’s not the one he will get. He gets the Jesus who knows he is on the way to Jerusalem, where state-sponsored torture and the ultimate inhumanity of the cross await. Peter wants no cross, just glory. However, the path to glory includes the cross and Peter doesn’t get it. He has a vision of the Jesus he wants. Though blinded by the light, he can’t see the cross that is part of his path to his ultimate glory.

As Peter blusters on about setting up tents, God interrupts Peter as he is talking and, in essence, says to him, “Will you just be quiet.” So, God interrupts Peter’s comments, saying, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” God endorses Jesus’ path that leads to the cross before the glory of the resurrection and the triumph of God over sin and death. This is the heart of the passage, the voice of the Living God: “This is my beloved son. I am well pleased with him. Listen to him.”

“Listen to him”; words not just for those on the mountain but for us as well. Upon hearing God’s voice, the disciples fell to the ground. Of course they do, the presence of God overwhelms them with fear, but Jesus comes to the prostrate disciples with those familiar words of comfort, “Fear not!” and not just words. He has a tender touch of reassurance and says, “Fear not, come on, get up. I won’t leave you alone. I am with you, we’ve got this, trust me, listen to me.”

Therein opens for us the heart of our faith, which begins with listening to Jesus and trusting him. God repeats the same words spoken at Jesus’ baptism. “This is my son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; but then he adds, listen to him!” A message for them and a message for us.

What if we took that seriously? That Jesus is God’s son, and we are to listen to him, not just a prophet or teacher, but God’s son. And this is a message for all of us, not just Peter, James, and John: listen to Jesus.

As I said before, we are being so shaped by social media algorithms that the church doesn’t have a chance to get its message out. Whatever we see on social media, we get more of, not to mention items created to incense us. And with AI, we can’t tell truth from falsehood. These blatantly false things look and sound so real. And the news, like our country, is so polarized that we hear from one perspective, the one we are comfortable with. I know that’s me. We hear from politicians, many of whom have given up on the common good and work only for their side, winning at all costs, no matter the cost to our democracy. Amid all this babble, God says to quote Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.”

What if we took seriously the command to listen to Jesus, at least for a moment, and quiet the other voices? Jesus says a lot of things. What do we listen to? Some are bound by time, and some are eternal; some are clear, and some are not so clear. As Mark Twain put it, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I **can’t** understand that bother me, it’s the parts that I do understand.”

So, here are clear, understandable teachings of Jesus, some essentials we can understand:

Matthew 22:37-40

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 7:12

The Golden Rule 12 “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

And then to challenge us and change us even more:

Matthew 5:44:

44 But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Jesus said these things.

As we move through Lent, perhaps we can work on listening to Jesus' clear words and putting them into practice. And let the words of God echo in our hearts and minds. "This is my beloved son, listen to him."