

Are You Listening?

Luke 9:28-36

February 18, 2007

I.

Today we heard about the transfiguration of Jesus Christ on the mountaintop, and the words of God spoken to the disciples. "This is my Son, listen to him."

This is one of the most significant stories in the New Testament. It is reported in virtually identical language in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It's important because it describes one of only three places in the New Testament where God actually spoke so that he could be heard on earth.

The first was at Jesus' baptism, where God said, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased." The second was at this transfiguration on the mountain where God said, "This is my Son, listen to him." And the third was during the last week of Jesus' life in Jerusalem when God told the assembled crowds that he would glorify Jesus.

Do we see a pattern here? Is God telling us something about Jesus? And today's reading is even more noteworthy because here, God spoke directly to the disciples. If we had been there he would have been speaking directly to us. If the disciples had a tape recorder they could have captured it.

So, not only do we have Jesus speaking on his own authority and the authority of his miracles throughout the Gospels, but now we have God showing up in a cloud and saying, "Yup, that's right. Jesus is my man. Y'all listen up."

When you really think about it this was an incredible event. We know that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to tell her she would be the mother of our Savior. And Scripture records many occasions where an angel of the Lord appeared to convey a message. But here, we heard from God, not an angel. God the Father actually stepped out from behind the mystery that shrouds his divinity and directly gave us a real message in real time.

And the message was clear. God did not speak in parables. He did not use metaphors. No translator of any version of the Bible in any language ever had any trouble figuring out what occurred here. God said, "This is my Son. Listen to him."

What if something like this happened in the secular world involving ordinary people? Suppose that your boss brought someone into a meeting and said to everyone "this is my highly respected colleague. I want you to listen to him," and then left the room. Well, you probably would quickly conclude that this new person would be speaking for the boss. You would pay attention to what he said.

Or what if Governor Barbour and another person came to the coast, and the Governor introduced the other person as having a plan to bring about a quick and complete recovery from Katrina, and then said "I want you to listen to him." I expect that we all would be on the edges of our seats. I don't think anyone would be dozing off during that presentation.

II.

Do we take God as seriously? Does the creator of the universe get the same attention and respect that we give to worldly authorities? Do we even try to listen in the same way?

That's an interesting question, especially as we stand here on the threshold of Lent. Ash Wednesday is only three days away. What can we learn from today's Gospel that might help

us in the time ahead? How can this reading be a guide us as we prepare for the observance of a holy Lent?

The answer is not hard. We are called to listen to Jesus, just like God told us. But for most of us it is much easier said than done. How many times have we said to our children, "are you listening to me?" I wonder how many times God has looked down at humanity, and asked the same thing.

Many of us are thinking about our Lenten disciplines. We're going to give up something, or we're going to do something that we should do but are not doing. For those of you who still are undecided, I would like to offer the idea of listening to Jesus as a plan for Lent.

But it would have to be done in a serious way. I do not recommend making a commitment to listen to Jesus as a Lenten discipline, and then not being serious about it.

Sometimes we do something for Lent, and we create a trap door or define our commitment in a way that gives us some wiggle room. Sometimes there is a catch in our commitment.

I recall the story about fellow who moved to a new town in Ireland. Each day he visited the local pub and ordered three pints of good Irish ale, all of which he proceeded to drink. After a few weeks the bartender asked if there was any significance to this daily ritual.

The man explained that he had two brothers who had moved away; one to England and one to the United States. Before they left they made a pact that each day they would visit a pub wherever they were, and order three pints to remember each other.

Well, one day the fellow came into the pub and ordered only two pints, and this went on for a few days. Thinking the worst, the bartender asked if anything had happened to one of his brothers. The Irishman said that his brothers were in good health, which prompted the bartender to ask why he had only been ordering two pints.

The fellow smiled, and replied, "I'm still drinking to my two brothers, but as for myself I've given up drinking for Lent."

That would not be a good way to approach a commitment to listen to Jesus. We cannot allow ourselves any escape hatches. If we really want to hear Jesus, then our commitment to it must be with all of our heart, and all of our mind. It must be total.

III.

So, how would we go about this? We might think that we already know, but perhaps we might review that a little. Do we listen to Jesus while we're watching television, or driving our cars with the radio on, or attending a dinner party with a lot of other people?

Well, perhaps we might. That is not a trick question. There is no place where Jesus is not. We might not realize he's there, and we might be distracted and miss him, but our Lord and Savior is everywhere in our lives in everything we do. It's just a matter of tuning in to the right frequency.

In order to do that it's helpful to develop some sort of discipline or routine. It could be a discipline of some combination of reading, of listening to others, of prayer and worship, and of seeking Jesus in silence. Let me repeat those four ideas again. It could be a discipline of some combination of reading, of listening to others, of prayer and worship, and of seeking Jesus in silence.

And no matter which of those approaches might work best for us, it is absolutely certain that we will not hear or see Jesus clearly unless the Holy Spirit helps us. We have to let the Holy Spirit control the remote, so to speak. And we know how hard can be to give up the remote.

If we to listen to Jesus in our own strength, and if we try to tune in Jesus or adjust the volume without the Holy Spirit sitting beside us, we are likely to see a fuzzy picture and all we probably hear would be a lot of static.

This is getting complicated isn't it? I mentioned four fairly normal things that we might do to hear Jesus, and then I threw the Holy Spirit into the mix. Wouldn't it just be a lot easier if Jesus would just send us an e-mail message telling us what he wants us to do. Wouldn't it be simpler if he just gave us a memo. Certainly if we checked our e-mail one day and saw that we had a message from Jesus@heaven.com we would pay attention, wouldn't we?

Well, we already have that message. We already have that memo. It might not be in a modern electronic format because it's been around for almost two thousand years, but we have it. It's called the Bible. And if we read it, and study it, and ask the Holy Spirit to open its meaning to us, we truly will be doing what God commanded on that mountain. We will be listening to Jesus.

And we also can listen to others. That's the second thing I mentioned. Our good Christian friends have much to say that might inspire us, or lead us to higher and more noble aspirations. Yesterday afternoon we had a memorial service here at St. Thomas for Lewis Davis, and anyone who ever was around Lewis for any length of time could not help but be uplifted by his spirituality and his Christian commitment to help others.

This leads to the third step; hearing Jesus in the Christian community of prayer and worship. Jesus is right here, in this room, and during the Eucharist we will experience his presence in a sacramental way. But sometimes we just go through the motions. Sometimes we get distracted and cannot really listen.

I'm as guilty of that as anyone. I admit that there are times during the post-Communion prayer when I hear the words "send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you," I sometimes feel a sense of relief rather than inspiration. It means I almost have gotten through another service without something going wrong, without dropping the bread or spilling the wine. And at those times I realize I that have been more concerned about stage managing worship than actually participating in it.

But Jesus is here, in this room, right now. And if we listen through the Holy Spirit we will hear him. And perhaps silence is a good way for some of us to do that.

The story of Samuel's call to serve the Lord is an example. It's in 1 Sa. 3:9-10. God kept calling Samuel in the night, and finally Samuel said, "speak Lord, for your servant listens," and he heard the word of God. Some of us, however, can have a tendency to do it the other way around. As we pray we might be saying, "listen Lord, for your servant speaks." The Lord wants to hear our prayers, but it is not a one way dialogue. He expects us to listen as is evident from today's reading.

These all are serious approaches to a discipline of listening to Jesus. Read Scripture. Talk about your faith with others. Worship in a Christian community that gathers to pray and praise God, as well as to socialize. And sometimes, just sit in silence and wait.

But underlying it all is an understanding of what we are trying to do. We are trying to listen to the Son of God. We are trying to do what God commanded the disciples to do, and through them commanded all humanity to do until his kingdom is fully here.

V.

God has made it clear, from the time of the early Hebrews up to the present day, that he wants to be included in every part of our lives. And one of the ways he wants that to happen is for us to listen to his Son. Jesus is here in word, in spirit, in community, and in silence. We simply are called to take the time, and make the effort, to listen.

But we cannot do it alone, in our own strength, in our own time, or on our own terms. We must make room for the work of Holy Spirit that is already within us. We received the Spirit at baptism. Now it is a matter of letting the Spirit work through us, which means setting aside our own tendencies to control things. If we let the Spirit take the lead we cannot fail.

The words that came out of the cloud to the disciples so long ago span the centuries and reach us today, and they speak to us today with the same force as then. "This is my Son. Listen to him." If we truly do that, if we really listen, we will find peace, hope, and an easier way to contend with our broken world. *Amen.*