

## “Transfigured”

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Exodus 24:12-18      Matthew 17:1-9

When my children were little, I didn't let them watch much television. By the time they learned there were other channels besides PBS, they had gotten used to the fact that our family was different. Of course they watched all sorts of shows when they went to their friends' houses. But at our house we found other things to do.

I did this for two reasons. One was for the sake of creativity. Television can be a good way to relax, and we all need some “down time,” even children. But the more time you spend in front of a screen, the less you spend playing and interacting with other people, and using your imagination to entertain yourself. I could always tell which of my children's friends watched lots of TV at home. When they came over for play dates, they didn't know how to play. All they wanted to do was sit in front of the TV. That was a long time ago...before the age of computers and I-phones. I imagine it's even harder today.

But the main reason I limited television was because I wanted to limit the messages my children heard from popular culture. Commercial television is full of programs and advertisements that feed stereotypes, and promote materialism and greed, sex and violence. Of course children are exposed to everything eventually. But I hoped that if the messages came in small doses, maybe they would have less power. What children hear and see in their parents has the most power and influence over them. But there are many other messages that can have an effect on our lives.

Now there are children's shows that give healthy messages. Back in the 80's it was Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. Fred Rogers was actually an ordained pastor, and this television show was authorized by the Presbyterian Church as his ministry. His congregation was an audience of children throughout the United States. And his message to them was “It's good to be yourself, even if you are different from other people. It's OK to feel bad sometimes, or have feelings you don't like. You are special just the way you are.” While commercial television offers messages like, “If you buy this expensive toy then you'll be happy forever,” Mr. Rogers gave them messages about persistence, self-control, honesty and safety.

What messages and voices do you listen to? Commercial culture tells us that we need certain things to be happy: lots of money, a beautiful body and an attractive spouse, bigger houses, better cars and the latest technology. In politics we hear conflicting voices about every possible issue, from the environment to immigration, health care and the role of government. What voices do you listen to? What messages do you believe?

In the story from Matthew that Joe read this morning, a voice told the disciples to listen to Jesus. Jesus had taken three of his disciples up a high mountain. And while they

were there, Jesus was transfigured before their eyes. His face began to shine and his clothing became dazzling white. Great prophets of the past, Elijah and Moses, appeared and spoke with him. A cloud overshadowed them and a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!”

We heard a similar message when Jesus was baptized. When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened and a voice from heaven said, “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:16-17). Today’s story comes in the middle of the gospel, and the voice announced the same thing, with one addition: “Listen to him!” This message came at a crucial time, because Jesus was just starting to tell his disciples a message they didn’t want to hear.

Up until this point, Jesus had been healing, casting out demons and teaching that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, was right there in their midst. This was both comforting and exciting, the idea that God’s power was once again active on the earth, and God’s reign of justice was near. Who could resist such a message? But in the middle of his ministry, right before today’s story, Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was. And when Peter said, “You are the Messiah,” Jesus began to tell them that he was going to suffer and be rejected and killed.

Peter protested and told Jesus, don’t say such things. In Peter’s mind, bad things were not supposed to happen to the Messiah. But Jesus rebuked Peter and went on to tell him that “those who want to save their lives will lose them” (16:25). That kind of message is hard to hear. But this was a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Now he would begin his journey to Jerusalem where he knew he would die.

Peter had a hard time taking those words in. He had just confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, but he didn’t really understand what that meant. And now on the mountain, he also didn’t know how to respond. The whole experience was terrifying, so he blurted out a suggestion that they build three little structures right on the mountain, one for Jesus, one for Elijah and one for Moses. But this holy moment did not call for words, or plans of action. It was a vision of who Jesus was and is. Suddenly they could see on the outside of Jesus what was inside – God’s power and glory shining through. The disciples were faced with the transforming power of God at work in Jesus.

Now there is one part of the story that is unique to Matthew, verses 6 and 7 which say, “When the disciples heard the voice, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’”

Jesus was about to go back into the valley and face conflicts, suffering and death. And the disciples were supposed to go with him. Maybe this experience and these words would help them believe and trust that the way Jesus chose was indeed God’s way, affirmed by the law and the prophets, and leading to glory. And they did get up and go back down into the valley with Jesus. They followed him all the way to Jerusalem. They paraded into the city with him on Palm Sunday. They watched him teaching in the Temple and arguing with the religious leaders. They gathered with him for a last meal.

And later that night they watched him get arrested. They went into hiding when he was crucified, but after the resurrection they were filled with the Holy Spirit and carried on his message. At that point they themselves were transformed. God's light began to shine through them as well.

“This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him.” Who do you listen to? Your husband or wife? Your parents, or children? Your friends? Fox News? NPR? It's not easy to hear Jesus with all these voices vying for attention. It's easier just to listen to the ads and go shopping, or just do what our boss tells us to do. But when we listen to Jesus, and walk with him, we find life.

So how do you listen to someone who lived thousands of years ago and is no longer here in bodily form? You can start by reading about him in the Bible.

I am always amazed at how few mainline Christians read the Bible on their own. I was at a lecture at Union Theological Seminary last Thursday and sat next to a young woman who was considering enrolling in seminary. We were told to discuss briefly some passages from the New Testament with the person sitting next to us. And while we were reading the passages, this woman confessed to me that she had never read any of the New Testament before. It was all new to her.

Every Christian who is able to read, should read at least one of the gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the first four books of the New Testament, and they each tell the story of Jesus' life. If you have never read one of them, I encourage you to do it during Lent *this year*. If you've read them all already, you can read one again. There's always something new to discover.

The gospels are not difficult reading, but they are challenging. If you want some help, you can join one of our Bible study groups. Every Wednesday morning a group gathers at Maurice Lovell's home to read and discuss the gospel of Luke together. And most Sundays after worship we have a group here reading and discussing the gospel of Mark. Consider joining one of these groups, even if just for the six weeks of Lent. You discover a lot more when you read together with others.

When you read the Bible, you read it first just to get the story. What did Jesus do? What did he want? How did he treat other people? What did he say about life, about faith, about God? And then you ask the deeper questions. What does this have to do with me? What do I need to pay attention to? What is God calling me to do or be, or change in response to Jesus?

Another way to listen to Jesus is through prayer. And if you want help and guidance with that, or just some company when you pray, every Wednesday evening at 8 here, there's a small group of people who come together for prayer. And they will help you.

One of the easiest ways to pray is called conversational prayer. You imagine that Jesus is there with you, and you talk to him. Tell him about your day. Speak out your questions, your frustrations and joys and fears. And also take some time to be still. Be quiet and pay attention to any thoughts that may come as a response.

Another way to pray is to read and meditate on prayers from the Bible, or to use prepared liturgies or prayers of the church. But when you pray like that, don't just read the words, but use them to address God and focus your attention on Christ.

Finally, one more way to listen to Jesus is by listening to other people of faith to hear what they think. You can listen to sermons, or engage in conversations with others. Or you can read books dealing with faith issues. Those of us who are reading Practicing Our Faith, or using one of the daily Lenten devotions this year, will be reading what Christian authors have discovered about living a life of faith in response to Jesus. And maybe Jesus will speak to you through their words.

When we listen to Jesus and follow in his ways, it changes us. We have more perspective on the values of popular culture. We become more truly ourselves and more able to forgive, more able to care about and love others. And God's light shines through us.

This Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the period of 40 days before Easter. This is an important time in the life of the church. During Lent we follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, preparing for what is to come during Holy Week, the death and resurrection of Christ. The transfiguration is a gift of light before we enter the trials and darkness of Lent. May we welcome the light of God that shines through this day. And may we listen to Jesus, follow his way, and be transformed by God's presence and love. Amen.