

**Sermon: “Listen to Him”** (Exodus 24:12-end; 2 Peter 1:16-end; Matthew 17:1-9)

*May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Today we stand at a turning point in the Church’s year.

Behind us lies the season of Epiphany when Christ has been revealed in teaching, healing, and mercy. Ahead of us lies Lent and the long road towards Jerusalem, the cross, and the empty tomb. And on this Sunday, poised between light and shadow, our Scripture readings lead us up a mountain.

In the passage from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him up a high mountain by themselves. Nothing in the text suggests they expect anything extraordinary. For them, this is simply another moment of withdrawal with their Rabbi, another time of prayer. And then, without warning, Jesus is transfigured before them.

His face shines like the sun. His clothes become dazzling white. The ordinary becomes radiant. The familiar becomes frightening. The teacher they have followed suddenly stands revealed in glory that belongs only to God. The veil is pulled back and for a moment the disciples see who Jesus truly is. This is not a change in Jesus. It is a change in what the disciples are able to see. They are not given explanations but they are given a vision. Scripture does not tell us what the light looked like in detail, because it cannot. Glory resists containment. It overwhelms language. And that, perhaps, is the first lesson of the Transfiguration, that God is always more than we expect.

The scene would not have been lost on Jewish disciples steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures. The mountaintop experience was deeply rooted in Israel’s story. In Exodus 24, Moses ascends Mount Sinai. A cloud covers the mountain and the glory of the Lord settles upon it. To those below, the glory appears like a devouring fire. For six days the cloud remains, and on the seventh day God calls Moses into the cloud. He enters the holy presence and remains there forty days and forty nights.

And meanwhile, the Israelites stay below, at the foot of the mountain. They can see the cloud and the fire. This is the God of holiness and mystery, the God who chooses, who reveals, who dwells in unapproachable light. And the people did not dare to draw near.

In Matthew 17, the pattern is repeated. We have the mountain, the cloud, the fear, the glory. But there is a decisive difference. The glory of God is no longer something that surrounds a chosen servant like Moses, The glory of God shines from within Jesus himself. What Moses encountered as fire and cloud, the disciples now behold in a human face. The God who once spoke from fire and cloud now speaks through the Son who shares our flesh, our humanity. The Transfiguration declares that the God of Sinai and the God of Jesus Christ are one and the same, and now revealed in a way that draws us near rather than drives us away.

Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus and they are not silent decorations. Moses represents the Law, the covenant that shaped Israel's life, while Elijah represents the Prophets, those who called Israel back to faithfulness and hope. Together they stand for the whole story of God's dealings with God's people. Their presence tells us something crucial, that Jesus did not discard what came before him. He completed it. He gathered it up. He fulfilled it.

In his gospel, Luke also records the Transfiguration account and he provides an extra detail. Luke tells his readers that Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about his "departure," his exodus which he would accomplish in Jerusalem. The use of the word "exodus" is deliberate. Just as Moses once led God's people out of bondage, Jesus will lead God's people through a far deeper deliverance, not from Pharaoh, but from sin and death.

The voice speaking from within the cloud was not providing new information. At Jesus' baptism, a similar voice spoke. But now the context has changed. A few days earlier, Jesus had spoken plainly about suffering, rejection, and death. Peter resisted him and the other disciples were confused and troubled. And so God spoke at the Transfiguration.

But he did not say, "Be impressed." Nor did God say, "Understand everything." What God did say, was, "Listen."

In Scripture, listening, is never passive. It means obedience, trust, and shaping one's life according to what is heard. At the threshold of Lent, this command rings with particular emphasis as each of us begins on our unique Lenten journey, as we try our best to listen to God, to discern how he would like us to spend this season of reflection.

Hearing the heavenly voice, the disciples fall to the ground in fear and this is entirely appropriate. They have encountered holiness. When they look up, Moses and Elijah are gone. Only Jesus remains. The Law and the Prophets have not disappeared from God's purposes but they point unmistakably to Jesus.

God's final word is not a law etched in stone, nor a prophetic voice crying in the wilderness. God's final word is his Son who walks among us. And the disciples respond as humans always do when confronted with holiness: they fall to the ground in fear.

But Jesus comes to them. He touches them and says, "Get up and do not be afraid." This was the theme of our Community Day at Bossey – "Do not be afraid." The same Jesus whose face shone with divine glory bends down to frightened disciples. This is not a God who reveals himself in order to terrify. This is a God who reveals himself in order to draw near.

The Transfiguration shows us not only who Jesus is, but how God chooses to be with us, close enough to touch, gentle enough to lift us up.

Years later, the memory of the mountaintop experience was still burning brightly within Peter. In his second epistle, Peter insists that this moment was not a myth or a spiritual metaphor. He states, "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty." Peter remembers the mountain because he now writes from the valley. The church community he addresses is facing hardship and uncertainty. And Peter wants them to know that their faith rests on something solid. They have not trusted a clever story. They have trusted a glory they did not invent.

The Transfiguration becomes an anchor. Faith is not fantasy. Hope is not denial. The light Christians trust is not imaginary. Peter tells them, and he tells us, that Scripture is "a lamp shining in a dark place," until the day dawns and Christ returns in glory.

But Transfiguration Sunday does not exist so we can linger in brightness. It exists because the road ahead can be difficult. In just three days, on Ash Wednesday, we will hear again the words, "Remember that you are dust." We will be invited into fasting, repentance, and self-examination. The Gospel narratives will turn steadily toward betrayal, suffering, and death.

But before all of that, God gives us light. Not to avoid the cross, but to trust the one who walked towards it. The Jesus who will be mocked and crucified is the same Jesus who shines with divine glory. The cross is not the defeat of God's plan. It is the means by which God's glory is revealed in love. We are given this vision not so we can stay on the mountain, but so we can carry its light with us into the valley.

At the center of the Transfiguration narrative is not the shining face, the cloud, or even the heavenly voice. It is the command, "Listen to him." As we stand at the doorway of Lent, that command becomes our calling. We listen when Jesus speaks of repentance. We listen when he speaks of mercy. We listen when he speaks of the cross and of life beyond it.

The disciples had to go down the mountain. So must we. But we do not come down empty-handed. We come down having seen the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ. Today, we lift our eyes to the light, and soon, we will be asked to walk through shadow. But the light we see today is real. It is trustworthy. And it is enough to guide us all the way to Easter.

"This is my Son, the Beloved... listen to him." May we listen. May we follow. And may the glory we glimpse today sustain us on the road ahead.

**Amen.**