

Listen to Him

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This week I learned that one of the residents of Yearwood House has decided to hike the Appalachian Trail. He is leaving his formerly homeless neighbors and heading south to begin a long journey. I hope we hear his stories someday. It reminds me that the Bible is full of journey tales. Abraham follows God's call into the unknown. Moses leads the Hebrews around in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus journeys to Jerusalem in the final days of his life and Paul travels all over the Mediterranean. His journeys include a snakebite incident and a shipwreck.

Today's gospel story is about a shorter journey, more of a life changing day trip. It begins with a special invitation from Jesus to three of his disciples. We don't know what they expect but surely they are pleased to have quality time with Jesus. We do know that something is up when Matthew includes a mountain in the story. This is always a clue that something big is coming from God. Moses received the Ten Commandments on the top of Mt. Sinai. Elijah hid on a mountain and was found there by God. Jesus was tempted by Satan on a mountaintop and later delivered his most famous sermon from a mountain.

On this story's mountaintop, Matthew skips the arrival details and gets right to the point: the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus is suddenly filled with light. His homespun peasant clothes become dazzling white. The ancient prophets of Israel stand beside him — not the kings and bureaucrats — but the prophets. Here is Moses, the one who walked out on the pharaoh with all of Egypt's slaves, you already heard about him in the first reading. And here is Elijah, too, another great prophet. In Elijah's time the king referred to him as "that troublemaker from Israel."

So we have Jesus the rabbi filled with brilliant light and flanked by the great troublemakers of the Bible. Extraordinary! The disciples are surrounded by this powerful vision. The air crackles with holiness. People sometimes describe visions as conversions or being filled with the spirit. Call it what you will, we can recognize a religious experience here.

Have you had a surprising experience of God in your life? I don't mean this particular experience in the gospel, although perhaps some of us have had a sort of mountaintop experience. Have you known a moment when you have felt yourself surrounded by God's light — or knew that it glowed inside you? Perhaps you experience God as inner peace, or joy, or wonder. It can be fleeting and revelatory at the same time. Something shifts; a kind of tectonic plate in our soul moves. A curtain is lifted and we experience holiness. When we try to describe the indescribable we cannot help but mix our metaphors.

The indescribable is exactly what happens to these disciples. So Peter says, let's freeze this moment. This is so wonderful, I want it to last forever. I will build houses, make booths, one for each of you so you can settle down and stay right here. Peter needs to do.... *something*. Peter is so human. He reminds me of a bumper sticker I used to see: "Jesus is coming, look busy."

But there is another plan here. The Voice of God comes out of the fog. The Voice of God issues a commandment on the mountaintop again. It claims Jesus and orders the disciples: listen to him! Stop, be still, and just listen. Put down the hammer and the blueprints and the strategic plan. Listen to him.

It is very easy for activity to come between us and God, isn't it? Our lives are full of obligations and responsibilities and opportunities. Even our blessings can be a distraction. I think a lot comes between us and God when we don't even know it. I wonder about it here, in the church, in myself. People ask "How are you?" and I say, I'm fine, busy. I have three booths to build here at Trinity, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, and probably some others, and I'm on it. I get the best seat in the house here; I had better be building something. I am busy building booths.

What about you? Does activity distract you from God? Do you sometimes feel like your soul is starving because your life is stuffed with everything but God? Then perhaps there is a voice for us today as we gather in the name of Jesus. Listen to him, it says. Listen to Jesus.

The voice of God can jump off the page or slip into our thoughts when we least expect it. The Bible says that God can be heard in the wind, and in the fire, and in the still small voice. In Hebrew the voice of God means "daughter of silence." It is generative; it creates the spiritual life within us. There are times when we need to stop all the activity and just be with Christ. At first it may feel like troublemaking. It may make us uneasy if we are not used to being still. But we can all listen if we slow down a little.

Many years ago I visited Mont St. Michel off the coast of France. This island rises up out of the sea and is dominated by a beautiful 8th century gothic abbey. I wandered through the narrow medieval streets which wind their way upwards and I passed a sign. *Daily mass today at noon in the abbey. All are welcome.* I checked my watch and thought, Great, I've got 10 minutes. I'll go to that service if I can find it.

Just then a man walked by who looked like the classic Breton fisherman. He had a woolen cap pulled down over his head and the collar of his navy pea jacket was turned up against the sharp wind. His cheeks were red and weathered. "Which is the way to the Mass?" I asked him. He pointed toward the long steep stairs. I began to run up the stairs and he called me back. He looked me in the eye and said, *lentement, lentement*, which means, *slowly, slowly*. I looked again and realized that there were hundreds of steps. It was sort of like running up the Washington Monument. *Lentement*, he called again, *slowly*. Then he turned the corner and was gone.

I walked carefully up all those steps and found a bare but beautiful room filled with light. I joined a little group of people huddled before an altar. We waited together in the quiet. As I listened to sea gulls and caught my breath, I thought, *lentement, slowly, slowly*.

After a while a priest came out in simple vestments. He moved slowly and deliberately as if in deep prayer. When he turned and faced us, I saw my Breton fisherman. The cap and the jacket were gone, but I knew that face and that voice. He began to pray and it did not matter that my French was rusty. I knew every word in the depth of my heart.

All these years later I sometimes hear that voice calling me back; *lentement*, it says, *slowly, slowly*. It comes to me now as we prepare for the season of Lent. Sometimes we must all slow down to listen to God. Then slowly, slowly, we move into the holiness of Christ. This is where we find miracles.

The true miracle in the gospel story today is not the dazzling light or the prophets. It's what happens to the disciples when the vision is over. By this time they are flattened on the ground. Jesus touches them, just like he does in all the healing stories. He heals the disciples' fear. The men get up and they see the same old Jesus. His clothes are normal and the light and prophets are gone. The clouds have lifted and the disciples are just alone with Jesus. They all climb back down the mountain trail and head for home.

The miracle comes home with the disciples. On the mountaintop they have received the gift of Jesus. Christ is the miracle that walks them all the way home. Christ is the miracle that walks all of us home.

He does not take us *away* from our lives. He leads us more deeply into our lives. Jesus is in the daily, the ordinary. Jesus is in the midst of busyness and confusion. Jesus is in the noise and the suffering of human life. And God says, Listen to him.

Here at Trinity Church, I sense that we are poised for a deeper, richer life with Christ. We are on the cusp of a miracle. God gives this to us. God gives us Jesus and says, listen to him. Christ is with us here in the beauty of holiness in church and Christ will be with us every day this week. When you leave this place you carry a miracle home with you. Christ is there in everyday clothes, in everyday places. Christ is everywhere that you will be this week.

Listen to him.

Amen.