

Tending to the Light
February 19, 2023 Transfiguration Sunday
Matthew 17:1-9; 2 Peter 1:16-21
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There is a well-known YouTube video where a little three-year-old boy is arguing with his mom where he says repeatedly, “Listen, listen, listen Linda, listen to me.” He does this repeatedly every time his mom tries to tell him to stop trying to get the cupcakes. It is comical first because we have all been caught in this battle of wills with a little child. But it is also comical because even as adults, we have struggled to be heard ourselves or told to stop talking and listen to others. It can be hard sometimes to listen even as adults, to hear the hard news others may be trying to tell us, so we just argue over them, holding on to the way we want it to be. We may even convince ourselves that if we never actually hear what is being said, that it isn’t true.

Believe it or not, I think this is happening in today’s gospel reading. Every year we celebrate the Transfiguration story when Jesus’ three closest disciples catch a glimpse of the full glory of who Jesus is. There are a lot of things going on here. We sometimes focus on Peter’s rambling about building huts or temples so they can remain in this mountain top experience. Sometimes we are awestruck, trying to understand why Moses and Elijah are here and what they may be talking about. But today I want to focus on why God needed to tell these three disciples, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

So, it begs the question, what was God trying to get the disciples to listen to? What did God need Peter and the others take seriously about what Jesus has been telling them? We only need to go back to the last scene to understand this message from God. All three synoptic Gospels have the same sequence of events. First Jesus asks who do you say that I am? And Peter answers “The Messiah, the Son of God.” And Jesus

Praises him. Then Jesus begins to talk about his upcoming entry into Jerusalem and how he will die. Peter tries to convince Jesus that he is wrong and Jesus rebukes him harshly. Then Jesus turns to all those listening and says these words,

“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Matthew 16:25.

Those are some difficult words, either way we understand that Jesus begins talking about his death and Peter refuses to hear it. This is where the disciples desire for a messiah and all their hopes and dreams of liberation what that would be like are competing against the truth of what Jesus knows is about to happen.

We all struggle with this. No one wants to hear or experience hard times. We want glory without toil. We want the victory without the defeats that come along the way. We don't want to risk but we all want the reward.

So, it is fitting that as we end the season of epiphany, the time of revelation and enlightenment, that we now need to prepare to face the difficult and painful reality of Christ's death. We need to listen and really hear the challenging words of Christ such as we heard from Matthew 16. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” We need to remember that we cannot get to Easter morning without first experiencing Good Friday. There is no resurrection without death. We hear God tell the Disciples to listen to Jesus. This act of listening requires one to also follow, follow Jesus to the cross and to die to self. This mountain top experience gave them the sustaining vision of the truth to carry them through those dark days ahead.

Such deep spiritual experiences can revive our faith or sustain us through deeply trying times. Some call them revivals. We are hearing in the news right now about a revival happening on the campus of Asbury University in Kentucky. They have been in a nonstop prayer and worship service for over a week. Some people are pointing to it as

proof that God is moving among the people while others are skeptical and claiming that it is fake. My take on it is that it is too early to tell. If it is a true spiritual revival, the real proof will be manifested in what happens after the services end. Right now, they are just acting like Peter wanting to stay up on the mountain top. They are waiting for a word from God. Eventually they will need to come back to daily life. The question is will it be a transformative experience that will shape their future or not. Peter held onto the vision and stopped protesting the idea that Jesus would have to die. He watched more closely, listened more closely and held onto his faith even when the world's authorities fulfilled all that Jesus predicted. He knew that the time was short and even though he may not have understood what Jesus meant by rise again in three days, he listened and trusted that all would be well with his soul in the end. Their faith stayed strong because they had a glimpse into the real Jesus up on that mountain.

Years later we have the reflections of that day in the writings of 2nd Peter where we hear the writer give insights into this event. Such events allow us to be eyewitnesses to the revelation of God in the world. It is not an individual experience, but one done in community that is confirmed by the witness of others, both men and women. The writer here realized that it is time for a new generation to carry on the prophetic word of God to the world. He admonishes the reader to maintain the light of Christ in the dark world and to keep hope alive.

Any student of church history knows that each generation is responsible to carry on the light of faith. It can be hard at times to know if a spiritual experience is of God or just religious frenzy created by humans. Another famous revival that we can see a true moving of God is the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906 till 1915. It was started when an African-American preacher named William Seymour moved out to Los Angeles and began preaching about holiness. A small band of his followers started praying for a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. After several weeks of praying they

experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues. This launched a series of services that drew people from across Los Angeles and beyond.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this revival was that people of all races, ethnicities and genders came and experienced this revival. Almost all racial and sexual barriers in leadership were erased. It was co-led by William Seymour and an African American woman named Neely Terry. The revival meetings did not have blacks in the back and white people up front. Everyone was together and sharing the experience as equals. When Seymour's teacher, Charles Parham, a white preacher from Houston, came to preach at the revival he was shocked by the racial mingling happening. Parham even tried to preach against it claiming the God was angry at the people for allowing this mingling of the races. Seymour and the others refused to stop the work of God happening among the races and ordered Parham to leave. This Revival marks the beginning of the Holiness movement in America and a countercultural work of God against Jim Crow laws. This Revival movement launched the Pentecostal movement around the world with over 6 million members worldwide.

It is fitting that we end the Season of Epiphany with the story of Jesus' transfiguration to carry with us into our Lenten Journey. To do as the disciples do and listen more closely, watch more closely and receive the deeper revelation of God for ourselves. For all who have ears let them hear God's voice in your hearts and work on discerning God's leading in our lives. Now I can't promise you a mountain top experience like the disciples received, but I promise you will grow closer to God if you apply yourself to these spiritual practices of prayer and worship.