

Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Exodus 34:29-35

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

Psalm 99

Take a good look around you. This is the last time the sanctuary is going to look like this for several weeks to come. Starting on Wednesday, we'll be paring things down. Parts of the service will change to reflect a more penitential focus, the color of our vestments and paraments will change from green to purple, shiny will give way to muted, or veiled. Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany. Next Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, our Alleluias will go on hiatus, and we will pick up the solemn petition of "Lord have mercy."

Today is the hinge between two contrasting seasons in the church year. Through this season of Epiphany, we have been following the unfolding of Jesus' identity through the experiences of those who journeyed alongside him. The followers of Jesus witnessed his baptism in the Jordan River, tasted the water turned to wine, heard him say in the synagogue that, in him, scripture was being fulfilled. They watched, or maybe joined in, as an angry crowd tried to drive Jesus off a cliff. They followed his direction and filled their nets with fish. Some rejoiced to hear blessed are the poor, others resisted loving their enemies.

Then, in the verses just before the ones we heard in today's gospel, Peter correctly identified Jesus as "The Messiah of God." But Jesus tells the disciples, in no uncertain terms, that they are not to repeat that to anyone. And then Jesus tells them that he will undergo great suffering and rejection, and that he will be killed and rise on the third day.

I don't think the disciples really caught that last bit about the resurrection. It's like the doctor saying, "you have cancer." Nothing really gets through after that bombshell.

The point is, that going into the reading we heard today, the disciples are not expecting happy times ahead. So as Peter, James, and John ascend that mountain with Jesus in today's story, it was not with light hearts and eager anticipation. In

fact, they were dead tired, as well as confused and anxious. Can you imagine the mental turmoil of what they are beginning to understand? Yes, I'm the Messiah! But don't spread the word. Yes, those who follow me will live forever! But you have to lose your life for my sake first. Yes, there will be a resurrection! But first you must witness my human suffering and death.

It is with all of that swirling in their heads that Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up the mountain to pray. And there, in the midst of their concern for themselves, and Jesus, and the future of all they have worked for, they witness Jesus bathed in light, transfigured by the radiance of God's love. And there is no doubt that they are in the presence of the Almighty! Even Elijah and Moses have appeared! Happy day! This is exactly what the faithful have hoped for! This is the Messiah they, and we, want to have for our very own, radiant, holy, and powerful! But....Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are talking about Jesus going to Jerusalem and what will happen there.

Then Peter, (isn't it always Peter who comes up with the bright ideas?) Peter wants to stay right there in that glorious moment of being fully aware and enfolded in the majesty and mystery of God. Peter says, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Who can blame Peter for wanting to protect himself, and those he loved, from the pain and suffering Jesus foretold?

But evidently, God didn't think that was a very good plan. Because just at that moment, the dark cloud descends, the disciples are once again terrified, and the voice of God speaks to them. "This is my son, my chosen; listen to him."

Do you remember when we've heard words similar to those? "This is my son, my chosen; listen to him?" On the first Sunday of Epiphany, at the baptism of Jesus, God said, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Those words, "you are my son," were spoken to Jesus. In today's gospel, God is speaking directly to the disciples, and to us. "This is my son, my chosen; listen to him."

The disciples, and we, don't get to hang out on the mountain top. The story doesn't end there. The work Jesus had been sent to do, the work of ushering in the Kingdom of God, was not going to happen on that mountain top. But the mountain top

experience did serve a purpose.

That moment of transcendent union with God, when the presence of God was so real, so magnificent, so filled with peace and love, that moment provided reassurance for the disciples. It gave Peter, James, and John a glimpse of the glory of life in God. It inspired and sustained them, and gave them something to hold on to in the dark days ahead. And there would be dark days, because right after this, the group descends the mountain and Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem.

I think that's why we hear this story today, just before we enter the season of Lent. It's to remind us that those glorious mountain top experiences do happen to each of us. But in order to see God's hand at work in our lives, we have to be awake and listening. It was only because the disciples had "resisted sleep," that they were witness to God's presence in that moment. And it was only because they obeyed the command to listen to Jesus that they descended the mountain to where the real work needed to happen.

In today's reading, the disciples didn't rush to tell anyone what they had just experienced. Were they too frightened to do so? Maybe.

But here's another possibility. What if the disciples kept quiet so they could continue to be obedient to God's command to *listen*? Listening is impossible when our minds are racing and we're more focused on how we want to respond to something than in hearing what is being said.

So how might we consider that command to listen as we enter Lent? In this tumultuous time in which we live, there is great temptation to "tune out," instead of "tuning in." The news is bad, it's depressing. It makes us angry, or sad, or frustrated. And the people around us are angry, or sad, or frustrated. And the last thing we want to do is really, sincerely, deeply, listen to others, especially if they disagree with us.

But imagine if we were able to listen differently. Not with a preoccupation of how we want to respond, but with a preoccupation to understand?

Henri Nouwen, in his book, *Bread for the Journey*, says that listening takes significant inner stability because it's hard to not feel the need to prove ourselves to others. To be able to remain silent in our thoughts and our speech, so that we can honor and seek to understand another, is what he calls spiritual hospitality.

What a difference this would make, if we were more interested in honoring and understanding a different perspective than in defending our own. How different would we be as a culture if our schools focused as much on listening skills as on teaching children how to speak and write?

As you consider how to accept the invitation to a Holy Lent, perhaps the place to start is to practice the art of spiritual hospitality, silencing your inner voice in order to welcome others in. Give up the practice of listening to formulate a response or rebuttal. Invite others to be heard without needing to make your own opinions known. Invite God to be heard, by listening, really listening, for the voice of the Holy One in your life.

You really never know where God's voice will come from, or what form it will take. Chances are, it's not going to come booming from a cloud. It's more likely to be significantly more subtle than that. And if you're not awake, listening, and inviting it in, God's voice is very easy to miss.

The Rev. Janice Head
Church of the Nativity
March 3, 2019