

Listen to Him!

As I was thinking about today's readings, although usually the focus of the gospel passage is on the difference this trip up to the top of the mountain made in the disciples perception of Jesus—on what is called the transfiguration of Jesus—I noticed more clearly that the voice from heaven not only identified Jesus as his Beloved Son, and that God was pleased with him but that God also had a message for the disciples. The message was short: Listen to him! This is easy to overlook; to get distracted by the details given describing the transfigured Jesus; how his face shone like the sun and that even his clothes became dazzling white. If that wasn't enough to distract not only us but also the disciples, the sudden appearance of Moses and Elijah to engage in conversation with Jesus was enough to rivet Peter's attention. Peter desires to make the mountaintop experience last, to build dwellings for these three. It is at this point that a bright cloud overshadows them and that voice speaks from the cloud with the message about listening to Jesus. Evidently, that was the last straw for their sensibilities and the disciples fell to the ground overcome by fear. Jesus comes and touches them, telling them not to be afraid—which is a phrase that he often uses to the disciples. When they look up, only Jesus remains with them and they begin the journey down the mountain. Moses and Elijah both figured prominently in the history of the Jewish people as ones chosen by God to bring a message to the people, to establish a closer relationship within the covenant. Moses represents the Law while Elijah represents the prophets. Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning is one which describes one of the most important roles that Moses had according to Jewish tradition. Exodus 24:12—"The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.'" This passage also speaks of God calling to Moses out of the cloud which covered the mountain and the glory of the Lord settling on the mountain. This is a connection to the gospel passage, but so is the reason that God called Moses to come up on the mountain. Moses was called up there to receive instructions for the people; instructions for how they were to live as covenant people; instructions from God through Moses that God expected them to listen to and obey. Elijah was also a prominent figure in Jewish tradition. He was called by God to speak truth to power; to tell the people how far from following the instructions given to them at Mount Sinai for their lives as the chosen people their behavior had become. When you read the words of the prophets, they often begin either with Hear the word of the Lord, or Listen to the Word of the Lord. The occasions when these injunctions given by the prophets were followed seem to be few and far between. In Deuteronomy 6:4, shortly after the commandments were given, we find these injunctions summed up in what is known as the She'ma: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In the Hebrew the word She'ma does mean to hear but with all the extra nuance possible associated with the process. It means not only to hear the sound, but to also listen for the meaning and to heed what is heard. This is made clear as the passage in Deuteronomy continues with instructions to keep what they are being told about the commandments they have received in their hearts, to recite them to their children and discuss them at home and when away; to be mindful of them morning and night. Later in their history, Elijah was also given a message to bring to those in power and the people; a message that they had not been

faithful to the covenant relationship; he called those who had violated the covenant to account despite the danger this meant to his life. Although he wished to abandon the task he was given, God continued to speak through him and use him to remind people of their covenant obligations. These are the two figures seen with Jesus on the mountain top: figures that have been important in conveying the word of the Lord. What we often ignore is the context of this trip up the mountain. Just before Jesus takes these three disciples with him to the mountaintop, he has begun to teach them that their vision about what it means to be God's anointed is not the reality that he is facing. In chapter 16, before the revelation of the Transfiguration, when Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, Peter's response is to declare that Jesus is the Messiah. The others have said Jesus is a prophet, they repeat that some have claimed that he is John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or another of the Jewish prophets. But Peter identifies him as the Messiah, the one promised to the people to be their redemption. Jesus affirms this identity, but then he goes on to explain the details of what that identify means. He foretells his death and resurrection, the suffering and betrayal that he will experience. This does not sit well with Peter who envisions a new kingship like David's and the reclamation of Israel's independent nationhood. Jesus rebukes Peter and then six days later takes him and two others up to the mountaintop where he meets with Moses and Elijah. The text first describes Jesus' appearance as being transfigured in the eyes of the disciples, in this moment they see beyond his usual appearance to the divinity residing within. Although Peter and the disciples see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, they evidently are not included in the conversation, even to the point of being able to hear what is said. Peter wants to make himself a part of the experience by offering to build dwellings for the three indicating a desire to extend this time. It is at this point that the voice from the bright cloud overshadows them and speaks to them. It seems that while God is pleased with Jesus, as shown in the assertion that Jesus is his Beloved Son; he is not quite so pleased with Peter's proposal. I mean, the cloud comes and the voice from heaven begins speaking while Peter was still talking. I mean it's almost as if God was saying, "Would you shut up already and just listen to him!" That sounds sort of funny, but it's not really funny, and in fact at this point Peter and the other two disciples fall to the ground in fear. And then the mountaintop experience is over. The voice, the light, the heroes of Israel's past are gone—nothing is left but Jesus, Jesus who comes to them saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." In the context of this passage, what is it that causes the disciples to fall to the ground in fear? They have witnessed Jesus doing miracles as they have followed him around the Galilean countryside, so they must have realized that he was more than just another human being like them. The appearance of Moses and Elijah has not caused Peter to be fearful. Instead he wants closer or at least extended contact, saying "Lord, it is good for us to be here!" The voice from heaven which overshadowed them seems to be the trigger. This command to be quiet and listen to Jesus seems to be the point at which fear enters them. Jesus has invited them to enter a world that they have trouble understanding, not to stay apart from the world. He crosses boundaries that tradition has made off limits, into Samaria, into the territory of the Gentiles. He touches the blind, the lame, even lepers. He treats all with compassion. He teaches that they are to do the same. He is taking them away from their traditional understanding of separation from others, of hostility toward others with his teaching of relationships based on compassion, on love. Through his teaching he is asking them to be transformed, if not transfigured. This call to accept others in this way is indeed fear inducing—

just look at our world today. Perhaps that is why that voice that spoke from heaven was so emphatic: Listen to him! An imperative command that needs to be heard, needs to be listened to, needs to be obeyed. As his disciples, we too are commanded to Listen to him! Hear and understand the message that he brought about how we are meant to live together and not to be afraid of one another. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.