

## Listening

Today marks the last day of the season we call Epiphany...the time when the focus is on the manifestation of God among us as revealed in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The last Sunday of Epiphany always considers a text related to what is called the Transfiguration of the Lord. It is the prelude to the journey that Jesus will make as he “sets his face to Jerusalem.” That journey which we make each year is known as Lent. Today’s text places us on a mountaintop and narrates an amazing event which we usually spend our time trying to understand what actually happened—transfiguration is a hard concept to explain. Each of the synoptic gospels describes the event—each does so in a slightly different manner. In many ways the text from Luke gives us the most details about what transpired, but to consider the event without placing it within the context of the narratives interferes with the message it can give. We have not followed the narrative but have jumped ahead three chapters—chapters containing important information about what this event involves. Our text from Luke begins: “Now about eight days after these sayings”...but the sayings being referred to are not Jesus’ teachings to the crowds. About a week before this trip up the mountainside, Jesus has questioned his disciples about his identity—asking who others say he is, and who they think he is. After various names which the crowds are using to identify him, Peter suddenly proclaims Jesus the Messiah of God. Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone of this revelation thus claiming the role. But Jesus has a large task before him because he now must re-educate the disciples as to what this role means. Jesus immediately begins trying to prepare them for the events which will take place in Jerusalem. He tells them “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Jesus lays out the entire journey for his disciples and also warns them that following him will be risky—they must be willing to sacrifice and die as well in order to save their lives in the deeper sense. The disciples in Luke make no response at all—they are silent. It is at this point that today’s text begins—eight days after this news of what is coming. During Luke’s account we often are told that Jesus goes up to a mountaintop to pray...and that is the purpose given for this trip. Often Jesus goes alone, but in this instance he takes three of his closest disciples to the top of the mountain. As he begins to pray Jesus’ appearance changes; Luke does not say transfigured but only that the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became “dazzling white.” As this happens Jesus has two visitors who also appeared in glory. The visitors are Moses and Elijah who have come to talk with Jesus. The Hebrew Scripture for today also talks about Moses’ face being changed--becoming so shining that the Israelites were uncomfortable in his presence so that after being close in God’s presence God’s glory shone on his face. Both Moses and Elijah were taken up directly into God’s presence within the Hebrew tradition; both were those chosen to speak for God; and both were associated with the coming of the Messiah. The glory they stand in reflects this close association with God and God’s plans. Luke tells us that the speech they have with Jesus is about his exodus. I know most English translations say they are

talking with him about his departure, but a better literal translation of the word is exodus. To some extent they are about the same thing—Jesus’ fulfilling of God’s purpose by his death and resurrection—but the exodus association highlights that what Jesus does will bring freedom and release for God’s people—their redemption from slavery to sin and death. That nuance is lost with a referral to just a departure—his death. Peter, John and James are witnesses to this event despite somehow being “weighed with sleep”. Peter’s response it to desire to stay on the mountaintop—to build three shelters—one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Whether this was Peter’s way to avoid having to deal with Jesus’ revelations about the cost of being the anointed one, or just his longing to stay in the glorified presence of Moses, Elijah and the transfigured Jesus—the text does not say. But whatever his reason for this suggestion, it was not received favorably. While he was proposing this building plan, a cloud came and overshadowed all of them which terrified them. In Luke’s gospel, at Jesus’ baptism, the voice which speak talks directly to Jesus—affirming his relationship and status in God’s eyes. This time on the mountaintop when the voice speaks it is directed at the disciples---and that now includes us. God’s voice from cloud says: “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!” After this speech Jesus is alone. And again silence reigns and the disciples did not discuss what they had seen with anyone. As each year I contemplate this text the usual focus is on what actually happened to Jesus’ form and figure—what is transfiguration exactly. We don’t really have any way to know—but whatever it was, what it did was to reveal the divine within Jesus—this was a clear confirmation of Jesus’ identity and role in God’s plan of redemption. In our preoccupation with what was seen, we often overlook part of what God’s message to the disciples said. He clearly said: “Listen to him.” How do we do this? Listening is actually more difficult than it seems on the surface. It seems obvious that we all do this—every day right. But listening to someone is often made inefficient—or just plain erroneous—because we are thinking and thinking about what we will say when it our turn—what our response will be. There is a technique used to improve listening skills called “looping”. The listener reflects back to the speaker what they have heard, what the listener perceives was said, and this is checked by the speaker for correctness. To do this type of listening you have to follow where the speaker is leading you. Just before our text today the disciples were listening to Jesus talk about his role as God’s anointed; but they did not understand. This misunderstanding is clearly shown when Peter offers to make three dwelling on the mountaintop. Jesus had just told the disciples he was the one to fulfill the law and the prophecies, but immediate glory was not in the plan—instead there would be pain, suffering and rejection. The disciples heard but did not understand. Now on the mountaintop God bellows from the cloud: Listen to him! There are many “popular sayings of Jesus” which could be placed into a sermon titled “Things Jesus Never Said.” Some of these are misappropriated to conform to our own needs or desires. “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”, “Money is the Root of All Evil” or “God Doesn’t Give Us More Than We Can Handle.” That last can be very damaging as what God does promise to be with us

through whatever comes our way, not to prevent any undesirable event in our life. Listening well is much harder than we realize until we try this technique of “looping.” Listening to the voices around us to truly understand them requires work—requires practice. Listening to the voice of Jesus through our scriptures also requires work. We have to be sure we recognize the misconceptions and over-simplifications of Jesus’ words—taking care to consider what Jesus said and meant—not only the words but the context and setting into which they were uttered. Since Jesus isn’t here to loop with us, we must research and carefully read not just the single verse, but the whole narrative. This is what it takes to listen carefully and faithfully to his words. Although Peter (and probably the others) wanted to stay on the mountaintop, Jesus listened to the need for him to go back down the mountain and finish the journey. There were still those who needed healing and restoring to community as he continued his journey. The work he was doing, the work he calls us to do, requires our careful listening and attention to how he demonstrated God’s reign should look like. Jesus has revealed what we need to know, we just need to listen and then act upon what we hear. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.